

CRANFIELD UNIVERSITY

MIKE SNOOK MBE

**WOLSELEY, WILSON AND THE FAILURE
OF THE KHARTOUM CAMPAIGN**

An Exercise in Scapegoating and Abrogation of Command Responsibility?

CRANFIELD DEFENCE AND SECURITY

PhD THESIS

Supervisor: Dr P A Caddick-Adams

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This thesis is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is an exercise in military history and takes the form of an investigation into a notable late-nineteenth century blunder; the British Army's failure to relieve Gordon at Khartoum. It seeks to lay bare operational realities which to date have been obfuscated by substantially successful acts of scapegoating and cover-up. Although political procrastination in Whitehall did not abate until August, the thesis contends that a timely operation of war would still have been possible, if only General Lord Wolseley had recognized that the campaign plan he had designed in April might not, some four months later, be fit for purpose. It proceeds to demonstrate that given revised constraints on time, a full-length Nile Expedition was no longer tenable. Alternative courses of action are also tested. Popular myth would have it that the relief expedition arrived at Khartoum only two days too late. The thesis contends that this is a contrivance propagated by Wolseley out of selfishly motivated concern for his place in history. Wolseley explained away the purportedly critical 48-hours by asserting that Colonel Sir Charles Wilson had unnecessarily stalled the campaign for two days. It was inferred that Wilson was professionally inept, lost his nerve and did not press far enough upriver to be certain that Khartoum had fallen. The thesis traces the course of the 'Wilson Controversy', analyses 'Campaign Design' and 'Campaign Management' in order to identify how and why the relief expedition went awry, and culminates in a closely reasoned adjudication on the validity of the allegations levelled against Wilson. The thesis concludes that the true extent of the British failure was in the order of 60 days; that the failure occurred at the operational level of war, not the tactical; and that accordingly culpability should properly be attributed to Wolseley.

Dedicated to the memory of
Professor Richard Holmes
1946-2011

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The fieldwork phase of this research was undertaken in 2009, while I was serving in Khartoum in the role of Chief J3 Operations, UN Mission in the Sudan (UNMIS). Fortunately, amidst all the drama of modern Sudanese history in the making, it was possible with practice to spot quiet days in the offing, so that on occasion the professionalism of my immediate subordinates allowed me to slip into the desert to locate, explore and analyse the battlefields of the 1880s. I am indebted in this context to Lieutenant Commander Graham Townsend RN and Squadron Leader Jason Davies RAF Regt. I must also express thanks to those of my international colleagues who accompanied me on my desert forays. I am also grateful to Colonel Johnny Rollins and his team at the British Embassy. Similarly the Egyptian officers at the Citadel in Cairo could not have been more helpful.

Neil Aspinshaw, a leading expert in the Martini-Henry rifle, helped me to experience the weapon's merits and foibles for myself, and later tracked down the Arbuthnot report, which had addressed its performance in the Sudan. Alan Readman of the West Sussex Records Office was kind enough to make Captain Lionel Trafford's diaries available to me, while the staff of the National Archives of Scotland were superbly professional in rushing an interesting sounding folio across Edinburgh to accommodate the imminence of my departure for Khartoum. To my surprise and delight the folio contained 'lost' treasure in the form of the Orders Book and War Diary of the Desert Column. I am indebted also to Andy Lonergan, who provided access to the MS account of Thomas D'Oyly Snow; to Mat Toy, for the MS account by Sergeant Charles Williams DCM; and to David and Julia Hollands, for a letter by Sergeant William Stakings. All these sources provided valuable clues in assembling my case.

In addition to the Bayūda Desert and the Nile Valley between Khartoum and Shendy, I was also able to explore the Red Sea Littoral, including visits to Suakin, Tokar and the battlefields of El Teb, Tamai, Tofrek and Hasheen. These necessarily solo expeditions were fascinating and memorable experiences: I was guided to places I might otherwise have struggled to find by Bija tribesmen, whose names I never knew and whose modern lives are scarcely less arduous than were those of their forbears a century and more ago. The Hadendawa man who guided me to the scene of Valentine Baker's defeat, and seemingly through a portal in time, was fuzzy-haired, dressed in the simplest of robes, rode a camel and was armed with a cross-hilted sword. While it is certain that none of the local inhabitants who helped me in those far-flung places will ever read these words, I nonetheless wish to place on record my profound gratitude to them.

Finally I extend my thanks to the academic staff of Cranfield University. My supervisors were the late Professor Richard Holmes, a lifelong hero of mine, who tragically died in the spring of 2011 and to whom I respectfully dedicate this work, and latterly Doctor Peter Caddick-Adams. Dr Bryan Watters was a member of the Thesis Committee. The wise counsel of Professor Richard Ormondroyd was invaluable.

CONTENTS

Abstract
Dedication
Acknowledgements
Contents
List of Maps, Illustrations and Tables
Glossary

CHAPTER 1 - INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 Opening Remarks
- 1.2 Thesis Statement
- 1.3 Scope
- 1.4 Aim of the Research
- 1.5 Originality
- 1.6 The Knowledge Gap
- 1.7 The Setting
 - Strategic Situation
 - Geography of the Battlespace
 - Historical Background to the Khartoum Crisis
- 1.8 Contextual Remarks
- 1.9 Lead into Chapter 2

CHAPTER 2 - REVIEW OF LITERATURE, HISTORIOGRAPHY AND SOURCES

- 2.1 Introductory Remarks
- 2.2 Wider Historical Context
 - British Policy
 - Wolseley, The Ring System and Command
 - The Sudan Campaigns
- 2.3. Biographies
- 2.4 The Official History
- 2.5 Key Primary Sources
 - Gordon's Journals
 - Orders Book and War Diary of the Desert Column
 - Official Despatches
 - Magazine Accounts by Military Participants
 - Verner, Trafford and Marling Diaries
 - Letters of Lord and Lady Wolseley
 - The Newspapermen
 - Memoirs and Autobiographies of Military Participants
 - Other Miscellaneous Primary Sources
- 2.6 Official Documents, Reports and Army Lists
- 2.7 Reference Works and Regimental Histories

- 2.8 Summary of Historiography
- 2.9 Lead into Chapter 3

CHAPTER 3 - METHODOLOGY

- 3.1 Purpose and Utility of the Research
- 3.2 Ontology and Epistemology
 - Approach
 - Immersion
 - Objectivity and the Mitigation of Cognitive Bias
- 3.3 Methodology and The Rationalist Dimension
 - Research Paradigm (Schematic 1)
 - Tempered Military Rationalism (Schematic 2)
- 3.4 Methods, Tools and Benchmarks
 - The Principle of Command Responsibility
 - Tenets of the Operational Art
 - Utility of Current British Military Doctrine
 - Experience and Precedent as Yardsticks
- 3.5 Gauging the Performance of Victorian Commanders
 - Essential Context: Army Reform, Age of Transition and the 'Ring' System
 - Contemporaneous State of the Military Art
 - Victorian Campaign Planning
- 3.6 Execution of the Research
 - Study Modules and Lines of Enquiry
 - Collating the Evidence
 - Confirmation of Research Objectives
 - Summary of Method
 - Sequence of the Thesis
- 3.7 Lead into Chapter 4

CHAPTER 4 - THE SHAPE AND FORM OF THE WILSON CONTROVERSY

- 4.1 Background
- 4.2 Wolseley and Wilson – Two Contrasting Military Lives
 - Life of Wolseley
 - Life of Wilson
- 4.3 Course of the Controversy
 - The Popular Myth
 - Wilson as Scapegoat
 - Wolseley's Informants
 - The Accusations Go Public
 - Wilson Fights Back
 - Williams v Beresford Hope
 - Publication of the Official History

- Forbes Attacks Wolseley
- Thomas Heazle Parke
- Post-mortem
- 4.4 Lead into Chapter 5

CHAPTER 5 - THE CAMPAIGN DESIGN PROCESS

- 5.1 Wolseley's Campaign Estimate of April 1884
- 5.2 Governmental Indecision
- 5.3 The Loss of Berber
- 5.4 Covering the Frontier
- 5.5 'The Battle of the Routes'
- 5.6 Gladstone Gives Way
- 5.7 Butler and the Whaler Scheme
- 5.8 Stephenson Demurs
- 5.9 Wolseley Takes Command
 - The Journey Ahead
 - Establishing the Lines of Communication
 - Wolseley Moves Up
- 5.10 Lead into Chapter 6

CHAPTER 6 - FAILURE OF THE CAMPAIGN MANAGEMENT PROCESS

- 6.1 The Campaign's Key Decision-Point
- 6.2 Campaign Review: Wādī Halfā 17 November
- 6.3 Wolseley Returns to Dongola
- 6.4 Dividing the Army
- 6.5 Wolseley's Secret Campaign Objective – The 'Grand Conception'
- 6.6 Christmas at Korti
- 6.7 Operational Level Decision Making: December 1884 to January 1885
- 6.8 Stewart Marches for Jakdul Wells
- 6.9 Implications of Gordon's Last Message
- 6.10 Wolseley Vacillates
 - New Year's Day: Adapting the Plan
 - Friday 2 January: The Death Knell of General Gordon
- 6.11 Seizure of Jakdul Wells
- 6.12 The Bayūda Crossing
 - Final Preparations
 - Wolseley's Orders
 - March of the Desert Column
 - Composition of the Desert Column
 - Stewart's Second March to Jakdul Wells
 - Final Composition of the Fighting Echelon
 - Jakdul Wells to Abu Klea
- 6.13 Enemy in Front

6.14 Lead into Chapter 7

CHAPTER 7 - THE TACTICAL LEVEL DENOUEMENT

- 7.1 The Mahdīst Perspective
- 7.2 The Battle of Abu Klea
- 7.3 Between Battles – 18 January
 - Intelligence, Decisions and Doubt
 - Orders and Intent
- 7.4 Outcome and Consequences of the Night-March
- 7.5 The Battle of Abu Kru
 - Wilson's Battle
 - Unaccountable Delay?
 - The Fight to the Nile
- 7.6 Before Metemmeh
 - Wilson's 'Silly' Operation?
 - Disengagement
- 7.7 The News from Khartoum
- 7.8 The Purported 'Delay'
 - The Reconnaissance Operations of 22 January
 - The Second Day
- 7.9 The River Dash
- 7.10 Khartoum in Sight
- 7.11 Impact of the Stuart-Wortley and Pigott Reports
- 7.12 The British Withdrawal
- 7.13 Lead into Chapter 8

CHAPTER 8 - ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

- 8.1 Preliminary Remarks
- 8.2 How was Wolseley's Campaign Plan Meant to Conclude?
- 8.3 The Hypothetical Relief of Khartoum: What Next?
- 8.4 The Alternate Course of Action – A Suakin-Berber Hypothesis
 - Time and Space
 - Combat Power
 - Water Supply
 - Camel Transport
 - The Enemy Factor
 - The Real Intelligence Picture in the Red Sea Littoral
 - Scheme of Manoeuvre
- 8.5 Strategic Level Culpability
- 8.6 Operational Level Culpability
 - Wolseley's 'Novel Expedients' – Success or Failure?
 - Campaign Management

- 8.7 The Tactical Level of Command
- 8.8 Lead into Chapter 9

CHAPTER 9 - SUMMARY OF CONCLUSIONS

- 9.1 General
- 9.2 Lessons Learned
- 9.3 Adjudicating the Wilson Controversy
- 9.4 Synopsis of Operational Level Realities
- 9.5 Endnote
- 9.6 Recommendations for Further Research
 - Archaeological
 - Historical
- 9.7 Synopsis of Contribution to Knowledge

Appendices:

- A. Lt-Col. J. D. H. Stewart's Notes on the Suakin-Berber Caravan Road
- B. The Fieldwork Phase: Egypt & Sudan January-Aug 2009
- C. The Martini-Henry Jamming Controversy
- D. Supplementary Notes to Chapter 3: Practical Aspects of the Research

Bibliography

MAPS, ILLUSTRATIONS TABLES AND SCHEMATICS

Maps

1. Theatre of Operations.
2. The 'Great Bend' and the Bayūda Crossing.
3. Metemmeh to Khartoum.
4. Khartoum and the 'South Front' Defences.
5. Where Wilson turned.
6. Battle of Abu Klea.
7. Abu Kru and Metemmeh.
8. Wilson's Operation at Metemmeh.

Illustrations

1. The Mudirieh (Government House) at Suakin.
2. The 'Narrows of the Nile' – Sabalūka Gorge from the North.
3. Zariba Position at Abu Klea.
4. Abu Klea Battlefield.
5. The Kordofani Charge (I).
6. The Kordofani Charge (II).
7. Zariba Position at Abu Kru.
8. Climax of Abu Kru.
9. Bordein (I).
10. Bordein (II).
11. Where Bordein foundered (I).
12. Where Bordein foundered (II).
13. Utility of visual sources (I).
14. Utility of visual sources (II).
15. Utility of visual sources (III).
16. Cartridge-case at Abu Klea.
17. State of preservation on the battlefields (I).
18. State of preservation on the battlefields (II).
19. Martini-Henry Mk II and P1876 bayonet.

Tables & Summations

1. Summation of Threats to Objectivity
2. Summation of Ontology and Epistemology
3. Marching-out State, Korti, 8 January.
4. Marching-out State, Jakdul, 14 January.

Schematics

1. Research Paradigm.

2. Paradigm of Tempered Military Rationalism.

GLOSSARY

Egyptian, Sudanese and Ottoman Vocabulary

- amīr** – senior leadership figure in the Mahdīst movement.
- anṣār** (singular; **anṣārī**) – literally ‘followers’; the designation given by their leader to the Mahdīst faithful.
- Baqqāra** (or Baggara) – grouping of ethnically Arab Kordofani tribes which lived as cattle-owning nomads.
- bāshī-būzuq** – irregular mercenary in the service of Egypt.
- bazīnger** – black African irregular soldier.
- bey** – honorary title bestowed upon Egyptian officers in the equivalent ranks of colonel and lieutenant colonel.
- Bīja** – predominant indigenous ethnic group of the Red Sea Littoral.
- fellaheen** (singular; **fellah**) – rural poor of the Nile Delta. Also used loosely to mean Egyptian other ranks.
- firman** – Khedival proclamation.
- Hadendawa** – major Bīja tribe.
- jazīra** – literally ‘island’, but used to mean the swathe of territory between the Niles south of Khartoum.
- khalīfa** – title bestowed by the Prophet on his four principal subordinates, a practice emulated by Muḥammad Aḥmad.
- khōr** – dry watercourse.
- Mahdī** – ‘the divinely guided one’.
- mudir** – Egyptian official equating to a state governor.
- noggara** – drums.
- nuggar** – Nile sailing vessel.
- pasha** – honorary title bestowed upon senior Ottoman office-holders, including British generals in Egyptian service.
- sarāya** – palace or grand building.
- Shā’iqīa** (singular; **Shā’iqī**) – loyalist Arab tribe from the Nile Valley north of Khartoum.
- shaikh** – Arab tribal chief or headman.
- sirdar** – C-in-C of the Egyptian Army.

Contemporary Doctrinal Terms (UK)

All definitions below are either cited verbatim or adapted for greater brevity or clarity from Chapter 2 of the UK Joint Doctrine Publication (JDP) 5-00 *Campaign Planning*.

Desired Outcome. A favourable and enduring situation, consistent with the political direction. It is the purpose of the National Strategic Aim.

National Strategic Aim. The government’s declared intention.

Strategic Objective. A goal to be achieved, by one or more instruments of national power, in order to meet the National Strategic Aim. Where the instrument in question is the military, its goal will be termed a Military Strategic Objective.

Campaign Objective(s). A goal (or goals), expressed in terms of one or more Decisive Conditions, which needs to be achieved in order to meet the National Strategic Aim.

Decisive Conditions. A specific combination of prerequisites necessary to achieve the campaign objective(s) and which, in effect, can be thought of as 'campaign building blocks'.

Campaign End-State. The situation reached when all Campaign Objectives have been achieved, amounting to the extent of the theatre commander's contribution to the National Strategic Aim.

Operational Level of War. The level at which campaigns and major operations are planned, conducted and sustained in order to accomplish strategic objectives within theatres or areas of operations.

Operational Art. The theory and practice of planning, preparing and conducting campaigns to accomplish operational and strategic objectives. Operational Art is realised through a combination of a commander's skill and the staff-assisted processes of Campaign Design and Campaign Management.

Operational Estimate. A structured process for command and staff analysis of the operational level problem. The estimate is a key enabler to Campaign Design.

Campaign Plan. The actionable expression of the theatre commander's intent, articulated to subordinates by means of plans, directives and orders. The plan should be kept under continuous review and modified where necessary to reflect changes in the situation, or in higher direction.

Campaign. A campaign consists of a single operation, or series of operations, which achieve or shape progress towards one or more Campaign Objectives. Operations have a unifying theme and consist of a series of synchronized military actions, designed to achieve specified decisive conditions and, ultimately, the Campaign Objective(s).

Centre of Gravity. The characteristic, capability or influence from which a nation, alliance, movement or military force derives its freedom of action, strength, cohesion or will to fight. It will normally be desirable to identify and attack, or neutralise, an antagonist's Centre of Gravity, and to realise and shield one's own.



Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 OPENING REMARKS

In so far as there is any such thing as the received judgement of history, it has, for the past century and more, been commonly held that the prime culprit in the fall of Khartoum and the death of 'Chinese Gordon' was Liberal Prime Minister William Ewart Gladstone, an interpretation predicated on his refusal to authorise a relief expedition at a sufficiently timely decision-point. In the aftermath of so abject an outcome, it was inevitable that the Prime Minister would decline to concede the government's culpability. That the cabinet was known to have been split on the issue only added to his personal discomfiture. By drawing on the oratorical obfuscation for which his defensive speeches were renowned, he attempted, none too subtly, to attribute Gordon's demise to disobedience. Whether or not Gordon disobeyed could be debated *ad infinitum*, but as an immediate political defence it was unlikely to wash with an increasingly jingoistic public. In the event it served only to make the firestorm worse.¹ Much of the condemnation with which the Prime Minister was beset was orchestrated by his Conservative opponents and by newspapers of an unsympathetic political bent. By default Gladstone was also deeply unpopular within the Army.² It was also well known, in the upper echelons of society at least, that the Queen Empress both disliked and disapproved of the Prime Minister.³

Regardless of the underlying partisanship of any one interest group, strident condemnation of Gladstone quickly won widespread public approval. The strategic mishandling of Britain's involvement in Sudanese affairs *was* to blame for Gordon's death, a domain which was plainly the preserve of the Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary. The government's *laissez fair* diplomatic strategy in respect of the Sudan was one thing, but such an approach was plainly incompatible with a renowned British general returning to a crisis-wracked Egyptian colony as its Governor-General. In the mind of the British public it mattered not whether it was the Khedive of Egypt or the King of Ruritania who paid his salary: Gordon was *their* hero. It is because the operational level of decision-making is, by definition, subordinate to, and constrained by, the higher strategic level, that the contemporaneous verdict, and that of history subsequently, was both so decided and in no sense unjust to Gladstone. He was the

¹ To the rational mind the very fact that such a debate could be sustained would imply that no unequivocal *order* to come away was ever given: preferences and inferences certainly, but nothing which would pass muster as an order.

² See by way of illustration, Wolseley to his wife, 15 Jan. 85, at Sir George Arthur (ed.), *The Letters of Lord and Lady Wolseley 1870-1911*, (London, 1922), 154.

³ Wolseley's view of the relationship between Gladstone and Victoria is reflected at his journal entry of 14 Jan. 85; see Adrian Preston (ed.), *In Relief of Gordon: Lord Wolseley's Campaign Journal*, (London, 1967), 116.

prime culprit. It does not follow that he was the *only* culprit. If it can be shown that there was still ample time remaining to effect a successful operation of war, at the point at which the Prime Minister's hand was forced politically, then this commonly subscribed to interpretation has served only to shroud a notable military failure, the blame for which should be more properly ascribed to military role-players than to ministers.

1.2 THESIS STATEMENT

The conventional sub-text to Gladstone's castigation is that notwithstanding an unavoidably late start, the great Wolseley almost pulled it off: that he was thwarted by two critical days right at the end of his operation; two days which, but for the actions of a subordinate commander, might have been played out in such a way as to reverse the outcome. The British military force which arrived at the confluence of the Niles, at around noon, on 28 January 1885, some two days and six hours after Gordon lost his life, consisted of a staff colonel and his batman, two captains, one lieutenant, 20 non-commissioned members of the Royal Sussex Regiment, a petty officer and two naval artificers.¹ This tiny party of Britons was split between two vulnerable river steamers, each of them less than formidably armed with a pair of small brass howitzers. The 28 British servicemen present that day at least enjoyed the close support of 250 Sudanese irregulars. But like the steamers, the loyalist soldiery had come from Khartoum in the first place: even the four howitzers were Gordon's, not Wolseley's. Estimates of the besieging Mahdīst host culminate, inclusive of camp followers, at the 100,000 mark. The number of fighting men present was not fewer than 30,000 and might conceivably have been as high as 50-60,000.² Only the fact that plundering was still underway in the city prevented all of the anṣār fighters being in plain view of the British officers aboard the steamers. Even so, a large, unquantifiable number were lining the banks of the Niles. How could it ever be plausibly contended, even for a moment, that the arrival of so numerically feeble a force, even if it had taken place 48 hours earlier than it did, should be thought of as constituting the 'relief' of Khartoum?

Remarkably, the notion originated with Lord Wolseley himself. But with all subsequent obfuscation pared away, the real issue, in military terms, was not where in the battlespace one staff colonel and 27 other men happened to find themselves when the clock ran down, but where on earth were the other 9,972 men who had been entrusted to Wolseley's command, expressly to effect Gordon's salvation? Analysis of the prevailing military situation would suggest that, in reality, Wolseley was not in any sort of position to effect the relief of Khartoum when time ran out for Gordon. Quantifying the precise extent of the British failure and identifying its causes will be key aspects of this research. If conventionally the received judgement of history has not wanted for answers to these conundrums, it is only because the man with the most reputational capital to lose went out of his way to provide them. This thesis will address the premise that Wolseley, the man who would have been entitled to

¹ The composition of the party can be inferred from three key participant accounts of which more later.

² The research adopts 30,000 as its working figure, but in so doing might well be reflecting a significant under-estimate.

acclamation in the event of success, but whose duty it was to accept responsibility for any misadventure of an unequivocally military nature, began to behave disingenuously in the aftermath of Gordon's death, by contriving a version of events in which the campaign would be seen to have miscarried not at the operational level of command, but rather at the tactical level.¹

Importantly, the subordinate commander selected to carry the can did not conform to contemporaneous preconceptions of what a military leader should be, making it all the more easy for mud to stick. Wolseley's refrain was picked up by a number of journalists, as well as by some middle-ranking and junior officers, all of whom fell too lightly into the trap of belittling a man who bore little or no resemblance to the military heroes of the age. The challenge is not merely to articulate the view that Wolseley and the other critics misjudged their man, but also to prove for the sake of posterity that this was so. Thus the thesis aspires to draw a line under a 'live' controversy which, by dint of its longevity, ought to have been long since resolved.

It was Colonel Sir Charles Wilson KCMG, CB, RE, a surveyor, Arabist, intelligence reformer and some-time 'political officer' who was unfortunate enough to be holding the parcel when the music stopped. Wilson was not an established member of the 'Wolseley Ring' and enjoyed no sort of pedigree as a fighting soldier, a factor which from the outset denied him Wolseley's unqualified confidence, and which would eventually lead to his being cast in the roles of ditherer, incompetent and villain. Perhaps worst of all, in so heroic an age, Wilson's physical courage was also impugned. It is as the man who failed to reach Khartoum in time that he is best remembered: that he was also an important Cardwellian reformer, who can legitimately be thought of as one of the founding fathers of British military intelligence, has been in large part forgotten.

1.3 SCOPE

The thesis will examine British military operations for the relief of Khartoum from April 1884 to January 1885. It will not examine the wider Mahdist Uprising from the summer of 1881, neither will it describe how the Khartoum crisis arose, nor offer any further comment on Gladstone's part in the proceedings, except in so far as his procrastination is embraced as a military assumption. The identifiable military effect of his irresolution was that the War Office hierarchy was unable to enact or finance its

¹ In brief the three 'Levels of Warfare' are strategic, operational and tactical in a descending order of scale. Current British Army doctrine articulates this at ADP *Operations*, (DCDC Shrivenham, MOD, 2010), Ch. 3, paras. 0309-0315, pp. 3-17/3-19. Expressed simply, the levels of warfare can be thought of as relating respectively to the planning, design and management of wars, campaigns and the contact battle. In practice the distinction between strategic and operational can often be blurred, while operational and tactical are generally readily distinguishable one from the other. In the context of the thesis, it is salient that action by tactical level commanders should always rationally support the attainment of the Decisive Conditions (interim steps) and Campaign Objectives set by their higher commander at the operational level. The levels of warfare are discussed, in the context of military history and analysis, at Stephen Morillo & Michael F. Pavkovic, *What is Military History*, (Malden, MA, 2013), 56-9.

contingency plans until Thursday 7 August 1884, the date on which the Prime Minister finally permitted a 'Vote of Credit' to be tabled before the House of Commons.

Except where in certain specific respects the process of historiographical review (Chapter 2) compels it, the thesis will otherwise not divert into any substantive discussion of 'Gordon Pasha', or his nemesis, Muḥammad Aḥmad ibn al-Saiyid 'Abd Allāh, who called himself the Mahdī, if for no other reason than that these two iconic figures have too often side-tracked historians in the past. They are treated here not as living legends but, rather more mundanely, in their capacity as military role-players. The issue under consideration is how and why the Gordon Relief Expedition went awry.¹ Because this will entail rigorous analysis of military misadventure, the thesis must inevitably address the question of culpability. Implicit in this will be the necessity to comment on and adjudicate matters of contemporaneous military judgment, for which purpose tenable tools and yardsticks will be required, an issue which will be returned to in the methodology chapter.

1.4 AIM OF THE RESEARCH

The aim of this thesis is to analyse the failure of the Nile Expedition, in order to determine whether the salvation of Gordon and Khartoum was ever within the grasp of Sir Charles Wilson, as Wolseley and others were later to insinuate, or whether instead the primary responsibility for the failure of the expedition lay with its commander and his adoption of an inherently flawed campaign plan.

1.5 ORIGINALITY

The literature review (Chapter 2) and the discussion of the 'Wilson Controversy' (Chapter 4) will show that the contention that Wilson was scapegoated is not new. Importantly, however, the issues surrounding his culpability have never been explored in such depth as to resolve them beyond reasonable doubt. Additionally, the exact shape and form of the contemporaneous controversy has not survived down the generations, save in so far as most of its elements remained cloistered within newspaper archives. The majority, if not all, such references have been collated over the course of this research, with the result that it has now become possible to reprise the controversy comprehensively, for the first time since it faded from living memory. In similar vein, it cannot be considered novel, either, to suggest that an operation mounted from the Red Sea Port of Suakin might have stood a better chance of reaching Khartoum in time than would a great waterborne expedition along the Nile. That said, it is the case that both these notions cropped up as matters of heated, over-emotional debate, when the issue was one of current affairs, rather than a matter of the mature judgment of history. What little discussion has occurred amongst historians and writers since the Victorian age has been conducted by inference, implication or unsubstantiated assertion, in large part because the debate has taken place in the popular domain. No professional military historian has ever addressed the failed expedition in the sort of detail required to arrive at a compelling resolution.

¹ 'Nile Expedition' and 'Khartoum Campaign' are also used interchangeably.

What has not been undertaken before, then, is a review of the key components of the British failure on the Nile to an evidential standard. This thesis seeks to achieve this by analysing the close detail of the planning and conduct of operations, the domains directly analogous in contemporary doctrinal terms to Campaign Design and Campaign Management. Chapter 3, which addresses the epistemological approach, will reflect on the perils of rationalist analysis, but in the meantime a doctrinal definition will enjoy immediate utility:

*Campaign Design develops and refines a commander's operational ideas to provide detailed, executable plans. It is underpinned by a clear understanding of the political and strategic context together with an effective framing of the problem. Tools and processes, for example the operational estimate, enable campaign design. Campaign Management integrates, coordinates, synchronises and prioritises the execution of operations and assesses progress. Campaign design and campaign management are inter-related; during a campaign, the management function of assessment informs subsequent planning.*¹

By grounding itself in the testimony of eyewitnesses and contemporaneous documentary evidence, the research will seek to arrive at a substantiated adjudication on precisely how and why the relief expedition miscarried. It will also seek to dispel the myths which have grown up around one of the military 'epics' of Britain's imperial heyday. In effect, it will constitute a review of the evidence which might have been placed before the Public Enquiry which Sir Charles Wilson pressed for, but was never granted.² Whilst the inability to draw on oral testimony at this remove of time is an obvious hindrance, the quantity and quality of primary evidence committed to print will go some considerable way towards compensating for the deficiency. The project has been successful in identifying a good deal of eyewitness testimony which has not been drawn upon before. That which is new will be flagged up as the thesis progresses. There is also much that is old, but which has faded into historical oblivion over the course of the intervening decades, not least the reporting of the cabal of war-correspondents who accompanied Wolseley's vanguard: intelligent, articulate eyewitnesses, whose words were read avidly in 1885, only to be rarely tapped by historians subsequently.

There are four more points pertaining to originality which need to be made at this juncture. First, while some writers and historians have *asserted* that the Suakin-Berber axis would have been a better option than the Nile, to state simply that it was shorter and must, by extension, have been better, will not suffice: the tactical and logistic feasibility of the route also has to be demonstrated. Second, nobody has shown

¹ JDP 5-00, *Campaign Planning* (DCDC Shrivenham, MOD, 2008), Ch. 2, para. 219, 2-9. The Army's 'land' doctrine suggests graphically that Campaign Design consists of the four stages: Frame the Problem, Refine and Develop Ideas, Express Vision, Revise Plan. See *ADP Operations*, Ch. 7, para. 0704, 7-3.

² Col. Sir Charles M. Watson, *The Life of Major General Sir Charles William Wilson*, (London, 1909), 356-7.

that the Nile axis might have been made to work anyway, if only the right judgement calls had been made and the campaign plan had been adapted in the light of new intelligence, changing circumstance and the all too rapid passage of time. This of course is a function of sound Campaign Management.¹ Third, getting to Khartoum in time was only part of the metaphorical battle: nobody has considered what might have happened subsequently. To what extent, for example, was Wolseley prepared to deal with the logistic implications of reaching 22,000 starving souls? What would the real world problems of such a scenario have been? Might there have been a worse disaster awaiting Wolseley at Khartoum had he ever got close enough actually to thrust into the 'lion's den'? Fourth and crucially, this research has identified that Wolseley would appear to have been operating a 'hidden agenda', in the form of a second, undeclared Campaign Objective; a phase of subsequent operations to which Gladstone and his Cabinet colleagues had not given their assent, and which Wolseley intended to force upon them, in the name of military necessity, at the appropriate juncture. This is an issue which has not been raised before. We shall see that because this veiled objective would have been controversial, both on political grounds and in the sense of being militarily over-ambitious, Wolseley had not even exposed it to Sir Redvers Buller, his chief of staff, with the result that a gulf in understanding developed between the army commander and his aides. In order to identify the closeted element in Wolseley's thinking to the reader, it has from the outset been termed 'the Grand Conception' and remains capitalised throughout. A synthesis of the contribution to knowledge made by this research will be incorporated in the concluding chapter.

1.6 THE KNOWLEDGE GAP

The issues surrounding the success or failure of a complex campaign plan will usually be multifarious. Some of the major themes are reprised here in the form of important questions which the thesis will need to address, if it is to infer an objective judgment on what went wrong and who was to blame:

- a. Can it be shown, Gladstone's procrastination notwithstanding, that there was still ample time to execute successful military options for the relief of Khartoum? How sound was Wolseley's initial consideration of the military options? Was it all his work or were others involved? Did he select the right course of action and how robust was the plan evolved subsequently? What if any of the elements in his campaign plan can be identified as questionable and why?
- b. Was it ever possible for the Nile Expedition to have reached Khartoum in time? If it was, what self-inflicted errors occurred to deny the British success? Where in the timeline was the decisive point and why? Could Wolseley have taken action to accelerate progress across time and space?

¹ Modern doctrinal terms will remain capitalised throughout the paper for ease of identification.

- c. What was the precise military situation when time ran out at Khartoum? Did the British failure occur at the operational level or at the tactical level?
- d. Was the Suakin-Berber axis always a better option than the Nile? Was it logistically and tactically viable? What sort of resistance might have been anticipated? How might the route have been made to work?
- e. How robust was Wolseley's plan for follow on operations? What would have happened if he had reached Gordon in time? How did he intend to get back from Khartoum?
- f. What was the precise nature of the allegations levelled against Wilson, who made them, and is there any evidence to substantiate them? Conversely, is there sufficient data on the basis of which he can be fully exonerated? Does the truth lie somewhere in between?
- g. If Wolseley somehow got the 'wrong end of the stick' in respect of Wilson's actions, how did this come about? What made him behave as he did in the aftermath of failure?

1.7 THE SETTING

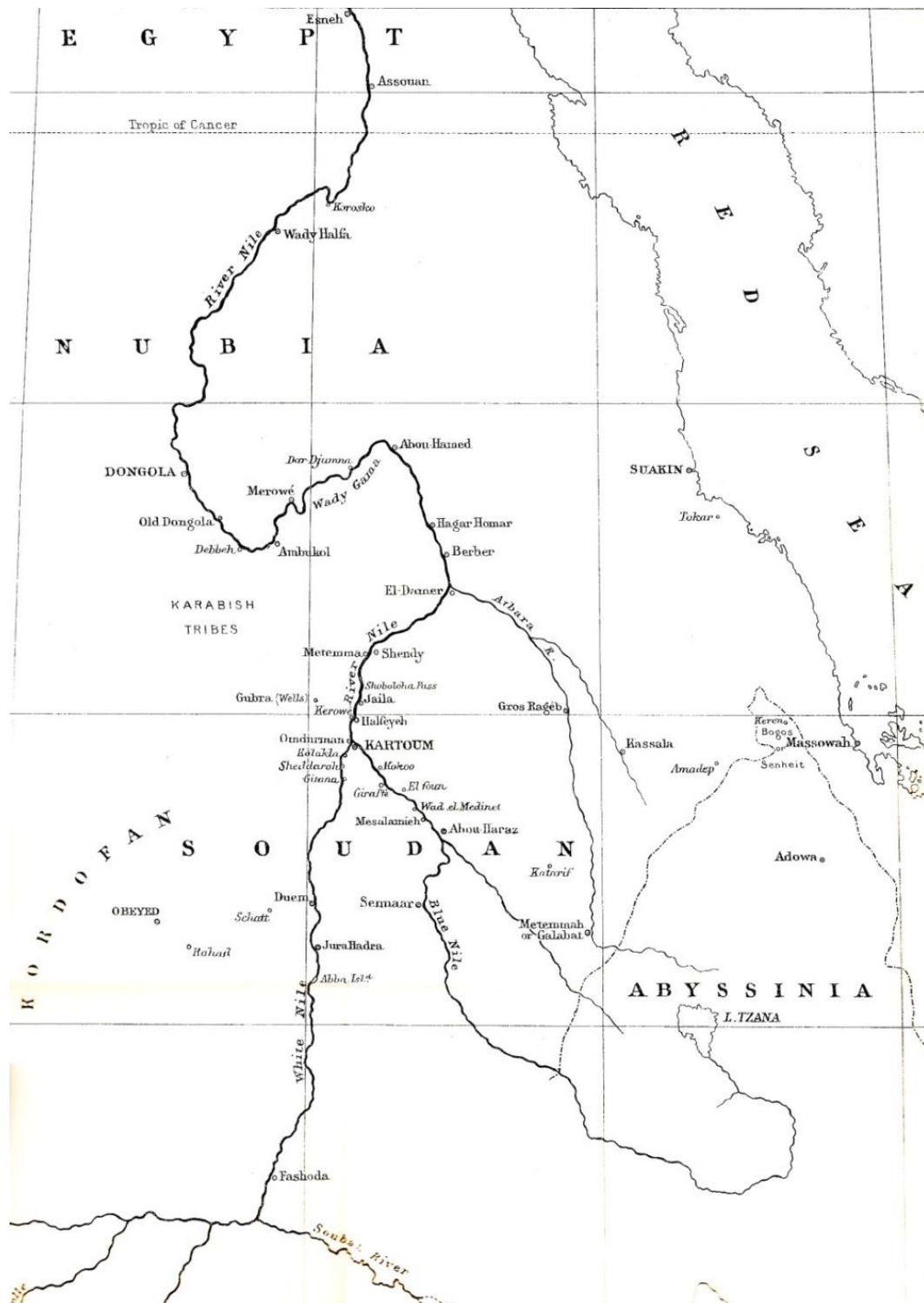
The remainder of this chapter is devoted to scene-setting, in order that everything which follows is contextualised. This will be addressed by describing the strategic situation, the geography of the battlespace and the historical background to the crisis.

1.7.1 Strategic Situation

Studying any major operation of war requires that the geographic intricacies of the theatre of operations and the tactical battle-space are well understood. The key components of 'ground' are illustrated at Maps 1 and 2. The theatre of operations comprised Egypt, the Red Sea and the Sudan north of Equatoria. This vast swathe of Africa was theoretically part of the Ottoman Empire and as such presided over by the Sultan at Constantinople; in practice, it was the all but autonomous Khedive of Egypt who actually held sway over it.

Following the army-led nationalist uprising of 1881-2, the khedival authority of Méhémet Tawfiq Pasha had been restored by a brisk and effective British military intervention. The 'Bombardment of Alexandria'¹ was followed by a land invasion which culminated with Wolseley's great victory at Tel-el-Kebir (13 September 1882) and the

¹ Notwithstanding its one-sided sounding name, the so-called 'bombardment' was actually a 10-hour ship-to-shore engagement between the British fleet and a series of coastal forts and earthworks bristling with artillery. Even though a number of ships repeatedly took direct hits, there was no comparison between the British casualties and the far heavier Egyptian loss.



Map 1: Theatre of Operations

Stephenson's 'Army of Occupation' was quartered on Egypt and Alexandria. Suakin was held by a garrison of Royal Marines and Egyptians. Like Khartoum, Kassala and Massowah were also still in Egyptian hands. Crucially Berber fell at the end of May 1884. Note the S-shaped deviation in the Nile between Korosko and Khartoum, observing in particular how from Debbeh onwards the river swings NE, away from Khartoum. The Bayūda Desert lies west of Berber and appears in detail at Map 2.

bloodless seizure of Cairo the following day.¹ Because the intervention had been preceded by a growing suspicion that the French intended to arrive at a private accommodation with Arabi, the British victory marked the effective dissolution of 'Dual Control', the arrangement under which Britain and France had jointly administered the bankrupt Egyptian economy. Dual Control was replaced by the so-called 'veiled protectorate',² an arrangement which saw an all-powerful British Consul-General directing the business of the khedive's cabinet ministers.³ In addition to what was, in effect, a British colonial administration, albeit one fronted by Egyptian notables and intended only to be short-lived, there was a small 'Army of Occupation' consisting of two infantry brigades, a cavalry regiment and a slice of artillery. With the exception of roving intelligence officers seconded to Egypt's new model army, now forming up under its first British Sirdar, there was no British military presence in the interior, which consisted in any meaningful sense of only the riparian belt astride the Nile and the Red Sea ports. Otherwise the interior was largely a matter of desert wastes and hard-living nomadic tribes possessed of no great affection for the government, except where the fealty of the *shaikh* had been purchased by means of annual 'subsidy'.

1.7.2 Geography of the Battle-space

As one proceeded upriver in a government steamer from Cairo to Wādī Halfā, on the frontier with the Sudan, the major way-stations were successively Assiut, Keneh, Aswan and Korosko. Famously there were six major cataracts north of Khartoum, the first and most readily navigable of which was to be found just south of Aswan. At Korosko the Nile jinked south-west to begin describing a S-shaped deviation of more than 760 miles, until at length it reached the town of Shendy, 98 miles north of Khartoum. West of the top half of the S-bend was the Libyan Desert, while on the opposite side of the river the Nubian Desert stretched east to the Red Sea. The Second and Third Cataracts, (together with many additional obstacles to navigation), were distributed along the upper half of the 'S', where the major way-stations were Wādī Halfā, Dongola and Debbah.

Eighty miles beyond Debbah were the towns of Ambukol and Korti, where, seemingly perversely, the upriver journey swung to the north-east, past the Fourth Cataract, to the town of Abū-Hamed, the northernmost point on the lower half of the 'S'. It was possible to shortcut the upper half, thereby avoiding the Second to Fourth Cataracts, by travelling the 250-mile caravan road running between Korosko and Abū-Hamed. At Abū-Hamed the course of the river jinked SSE for 150 miles, through a little-known and hostile desert environment. Not far beyond the Fifth Cataract, and slightly less than 200 miles north of Khartoum, was the strategically important town of Berber,

¹ For the official history of the intervention see Col. J. F. Maurice, *Military History of the Campaign of 1882 in Egypt*, (London, 1887).

² Peter Mansfield, *The British in Egypt*, (London, 1971).

³ The key primary source for the Anglo-Egyptian relationship at this time is Earl of Cromer, *Modern Egypt* [2 vols.], (London, 1908).



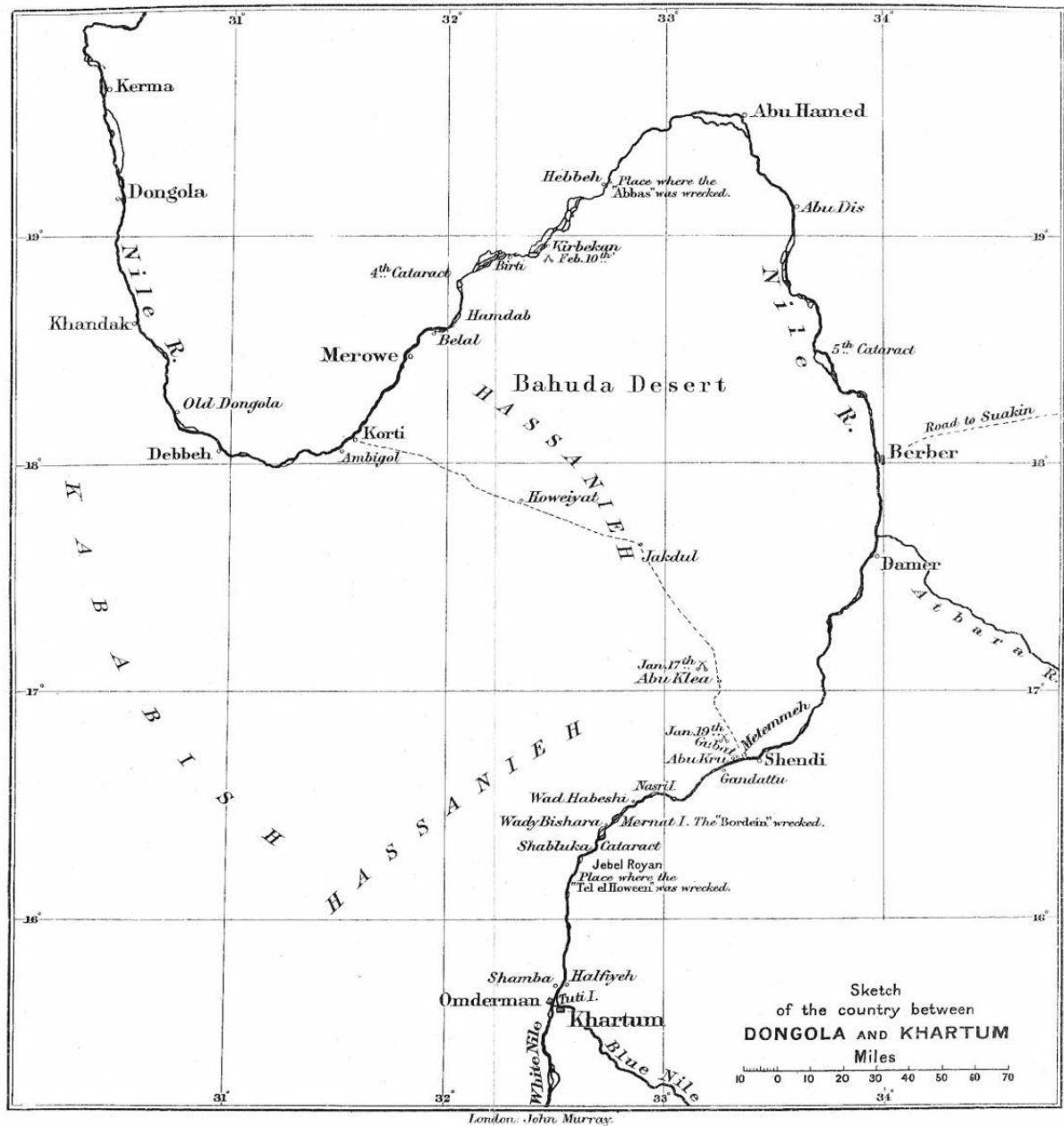
Illustration 1: The Mudirieh (Government House) at Suakin.

[Image Source: Fieldwork Phase, 2009.]

from whence the capital could be reached by means of a four-day steamer journey. Importantly, the viability of this final leg was dependent upon the seasonal state of the Nile.

A 245-mile caravan route ran east out of Berber to the Red Sea port of Suakin, with the result that both towns represented important hubs on the pilgrim route from Central Africa to Mecca. Although a 245-mile journey by camel could consume a fortnight, the Suakin-Berber 'road', more a metaphor than a highway, was regarded as the optimal way of reaching Khartoum. All things being equal, one could disembark at Suakin and reach the capital in under three weeks. Before the coming of the aeroplane this was a fundamental element in regional geo-strategy.

Just as it was possible to shortcut the top half of the 'S', by travelling overland from Korosko to Abū-Hamed, it was also possible to shortcut the bottom half, the so-called 'Great Bend' in the Nile (see Map 2). This was accomplished by following the caravan road linking the riparian towns of Ambukol and Korti, on one side of the Bayūda Desert, to Shendy and Metemmeh on the far side – a distance of 174 miles. Having emerged from the desert to re-join the Nile at Metemmeh, the traveller would find himself 98 miles north of Khartoum. Intervening between this point and the capital were, successively, the shallows at Wad Habeshi, Mernat Island (one of hundreds in this stretch of the river), the Sixth Cataract, a four-mile river gorge called Sabalūka and, finally, the confluence of the Blue and White Niles. This stretch of the Nile is shown at Map 3, while the Sabalūka Gorge can be seen at Illustration 2.



Map 2: The 'Great Bend' and the Bayūda Crossing

The Bayūda crossing from Korti to Metemneh is 174 miles long, while Metemneh lies 98 miles north of Khartoum. [Image Source: Watson, *Life of Wilson*, (London, 1909).]

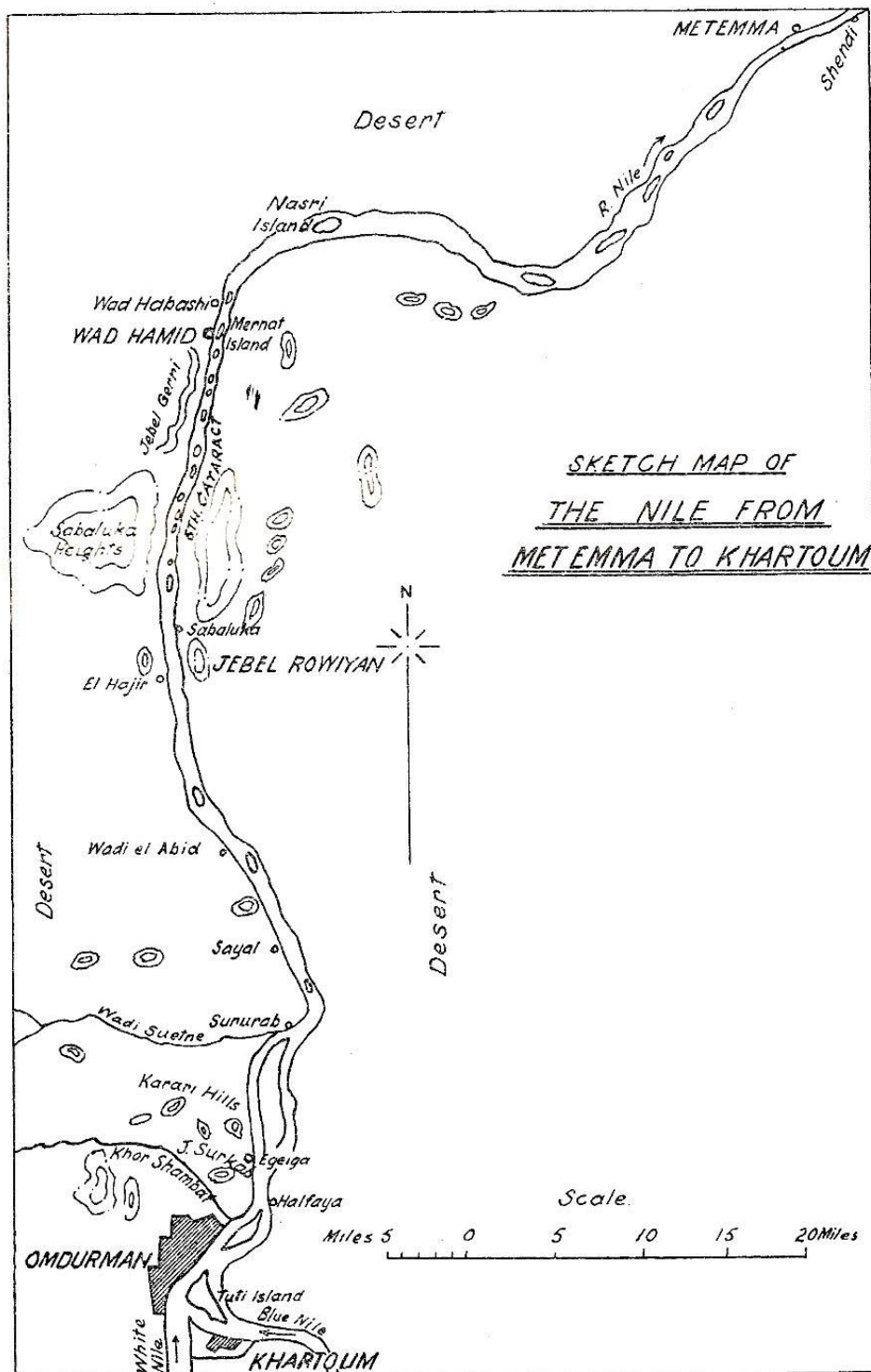


Illustration 2: ‘The Narrows of the Nile’ – Sabalūka Gorge from the North.

Halfway between Metemmeh and Khartoum, the Sabalūka Gorge springs from an otherwise flat desert to line the banks of the Nile for about 4 miles. Although the gorge is not an obstacle to navigation, it constitutes a potentially formidable military obstacle. Remarkably the Mahdists failed to defend the feature against Wilson’s steamers, failed to intercept him there on his return journey and also failed to contest the passage of Kitchener’s flotilla in 1898. [Image Source: Fieldwork Phase, 2009.]

The navigability of the cataracts north of Khartoum was critically dependent on the seasonal rains which rushed down the Blue Nile from the Abyssinian highlands to merge with the waters of the White Nile directly opposite the fort at Omdurman. People spoke, then and now, of ‘high-Nile’ and ‘low-Nile’ as if they are fixed points in the calendar, but the best manner in which to encapsulate the phenomenon is to observe that the river is typically ‘high’ between the months of June and September; begins falling gradually after that; can be thought of as ‘low’ from Christmas onwards; and as at its worst between April and May. Thus, if one wanted to get an army to Khartoum by water, it was as well to be at Wādī Halfā, with one’s boats, soldiers and stores, by not later than the end of August, with 122 days to go before New Year’s Day. In that event, it would be necessary to make only about 7 miles a day to cover the distance to Khartoum. If, on the other hand, the first batch of troop-carrying whalers do not arrive in Alexandria until 22 September, and the last batch until 18 October; if the specialist boatmen intended to support the enterprise are still in Quebec on 14 September and will not reach Wādī Halfā before 26 October;¹ and if the soldiers

¹ Col. H. E. Colville, *History of the Sudan Campaign 1884-5*, [Official History – henceforward referenced as OH], (London, 1889), i, appx. 4, *Report on Canadian Voyageurs*, 187-190.



Map 3: Metemmeh to Khartoum

The distance from Metemmeh to Khartoum by the river is 98 miles. The Sixth Cataract can be regarded as running for about 20 miles, from the vicinity of Jebel Royan, ('Rowyian' on the map), to within 3 miles of Mernat Island. The distance from Mernat to Metemmeh is about 40 miles. [Image Source: Sandes, *The Royal Engineers in Egypt and the Sudan*, (RE Institute, Chatham, 1937).]

destined to form the highly novel 'Camel Corps' do not disembark in Egypt until 7 October,¹ then the seasonal fall of the Nile will create many more bottlenecks along the route than formerly. In other words, miss high-Nile and the staff projections for river movement will no longer be transacted in the same currency.

1.7.3 Historical Background to the Khartoum Crisis

Major General Gordon arrived in Khartoum to assume the office of Governor-General of the Sudan, for the second time, on 18 February 1884. The catalyst for his return was the Battle of Shaikān (4/5 November 1883),² commonly referred to as the 'Hicks Disaster', in which 10,000 Egyptian and Sudanese soldiers had been massacred by the Mahdists.³ Although Gordon was still a serving British officer, he now found himself in the more immediate employ of the Khedive. The orders he received in Cairo required him to terminate Egyptian rule in the Sudan,⁴ evacuate the surviving soldiers, officials and dependents, and somehow turn a vast swathe of the African interior over to an ill-defined form of self-government. He was to be answerable to the British Consul-General, Sir Evelyn Baring, and, through him, both to Nubar Pasha's khedival cabinet in Cairo and the Liberal administration in Whitehall.⁵

The man directly supervising Baring from the London end of the telegraph was the Foreign Secretary, Granville Leveson-Gower, 2nd Earl of Granville. Although it had formed no part of Gladstone's original intent that Gordon should assume an executive role, Granville had failed to raise an objection to his appointment as governor-general, when he might and probably ought to have done so. He then proceeded to feign surprise on learning that Cairo had despatched Gordon to the south, bearing a khedival *firman* appointing him to the highest office in the land.⁶ A short distance across Whitehall at the War Office,⁷ the office of Secretary of State for War was occupied by Spencer Cavendish, Marquess of Hartington, (later the 8th Duke of Devonshire). Hartington had led the Liberals in opposition but, following the election victory of 1880, had magnanimously stepped aside to allow Gladstone to assume the premiership for a second time. As the head of the powerful Whig faction, within a fractious liberal alliance, Hartington was capable of exercising a degree of influence which Gladstone could ill-afford to ignore.

As the Adjutant-General, Wolseley was the second most powerful soldier in the land. Above him in the War Office hierarchy were the department's political and

¹ Dates given in this passage are extracted from Colville, OH, i, 176-7.

² There is conventionally some doubt as to which of these two days saw the climactic disaster.

³ Colville, OH, i, 14-16.

⁴ A policy, imposed by the Gladstone government, which had triggered the mass resignation of the previous Egyptian cabinet.

⁵ For the despatch of Gordon and his appointment as Governor-General see Cromer, *Modern Egypt*. For the drafting of Gordon's orders, at a meeting with Wolseley and members of the cabinet in Whitehall (18 Jan. 84), see Cromer *Modern Egypt*, i, 443-4. For the orders given in Cairo; *Ibid*, i, 444-6.

⁶ For the text of the *firman* see the Parliamentary Blue Book, Egypt No. 12/1884, 27. For the traffic between Baring and Granville on Gordon's appointment, including Granville's disingenuous expression of surprise; *Ibid*, 27-9.

⁷ Then located at Cumberland House (since demolished) in Pall Mall.

military supremoes; Lord Hartington and HRH the Duke of Cambridge respectively. Wolseley related to his superiors, in effect, as the minister's senior professional adviser and as the C-in-C's chief of staff, an arrangement which would be considered anomalous today, and which undoubtedly lay behind many of the spats between Wolseley and the Duke. There was no formal channel of communication between Gordon in Khartoum and anybody at the War Office, nor did he enjoy a direct command and control relationship with any of the three principal general officers in Cairo. The senior member of the triumvirate was Lieutenant General Sir Frederick Stephenson, a veteran of the Crimea and the Mutiny, now GOC Cairo¹ and commander of the 'Army of Occupation'. The new Egyptian Army, (or 'EA' as it was commonly referred to), still under training, and at London's insistence debarred from service in the Sudan, was commanded by Major General Sir Evelyn Wood VC, a leading member of the Wolseley Ring. The head of the Gendarmerie was Lieutenant General (Ottoman rank) Valentine Baker Pasha, younger brother of Sir Samuel Baker, the renowned Nile explorer and first Governor of Equatoria. As the Commanding Officer of the 10th Hussars, a leading cavalry theorist² and a personal friend of the Prince of Wales, the younger Baker had appeared destined for the highest ranks in the service. On 17 June 1875, however, he was brought low by an allegation of indecent assault.³

After completing a year-long prison sentence, the disgraced Baker fled the country to seek service with the Sultan. After commanding a division in the Russo-Turkish War with distinction, he had aspired to be appointed as the new EA's first Sirdar. He crossed the Mediterranean only to find that his candidacy had been vetoed by Queen Victoria, who was not prepared to countenance seconded British officers serving under a man whose legal standing at home equated to that of a dishonourably discharged private soldier. The Egyptians were sympathetic enough to employ Baker at the head of the Gendarmerie by way of consolation. Even as Gordon was in transit to Khartoum, Baker was presiding over a disastrous military operation in the Red Sea Littoral. On 4 February 1884, the khedive's last deployable formation, a scratch brigade of gendarmes and black African regulars, was routed by a numerically inferior Bija force at a middle-of-nowhere place called Andatteib, better known in the English-speaking world as 'El Teb'.⁴ The triumph of 'Uṯmān abū Bakr Digna (anglicised hereafter as 'Osman Digna') in the east, left Khartoum and the Nile Valley sandwiched between great swathes of rebel territory. By the time Gordon arrived in the capital the valley had already been infiltrated by rebel forces emerging from Kordofan, the Mahdīst heartland in the west. Within only a few weeks, strategically important Berber was under threat.

There had been controversy enough over Gladstone's refusal to accept any responsibility for the Sudan, when every branch of the Cairene government received its orders from Baring and his officials but, coming on top of the Hicks disaster, El Teb

¹ GOC: 'General Officer Commanding'.

² See Baker's *The British Cavalry with Remarks on its Practical Organization*, (London, 1858).

³ The victim was a 22-year-old by the name of Miss Rebecca Dickinson. Famously the incident took place in a first class railway compartment and is often said to have acted as the catalyst to the introduction of corridors. For a modern account of the affair see Brian Thompson, *Imperial Vanities: the Adventures of the Baker brothers and Gordon of Khartoum*, (London, 2002), 160-7.

⁴ A short account is to be found at Colvile, OH, i, 19-20.

now whipped up a firestorm of condemnation which left the Prime Minister with little choice but to authorise military intervention in the littoral. In the short-lived First Suakin Campaign, (February-April 1884), Major General Sir Gerald Graham VC gained hard-won victories at 2nd El Teb (29 February) and Tamai (13 March).¹ It is of note that Graham did battle at El Teb, at the head of two infantry brigades and a cavalry brigade, a little over three weeks after the Baker disaster. While one of his six battalions had come from Aden, and a second, together with the 10th Hussars, had been landed from a homeward-bound troopship, the bulk of the force had deployed from Cairo and Alexandria and went into battle after a lapse of only 25 days. Since it was possible to march from Suakin to Berber in a fortnight, we can calculate that it would have been theoretically possible, at any point during the Khartoum crisis, to get a British brigade from Egypt to Berber in only 39 days. Crucially this projection does not rely on hindsight; it was demonstrably true when Wolseley considered military options for the relief of Khartoum.

The Suakin-Berber caravan road was the standard route by which Egyptian units deployed to Khartoum.² It was poorly watered, however, so that while it was viable for battalion-sized columns, any larger force was obliged to subdivide and march by detachments at intervals of 2-3 days, in order that key waterholes could recharge by percolation. This factor compels the extension of the 39-day projection by, say, four 3-day intervals, to give an overall journey time for a brigade, Cairo to Berber, of not more than 51 days. It follows that within an overall time-span of nine weeks, a second brigade could have joined the first at Berber.

Concerned in the aftermath of Tamai that Gordon was likely to become boxed in if nothing was done to support him, Graham now advocated advancing Colonel Herbert Stewart's cavalry brigade to Berber.³ On the basis of advice from Generals Stephenson and Wood, who recognised that such an operation would be difficult but not impossible, Baring lent strong support to the proposal, suggesting to Granville that there was a moral obligation on the government to do something to assist Gordon.⁴ Unfortunately, an eminently sensible scheme which would have prevented the loss of Berber, and, in all likelihood, have permitted any subsequent necessity to relieve Khartoum to be executed with relative ease, was vetoed by Gladstone and Granville.⁵ In the event they had to be pressed, even to endorse the limited operation Graham now proposed mounting against the rebel encampment at Tamanieb. At first they 'deprecated' the despatch of an expedition 'for fighting purposes', stating that they were, 'disposed to recommend, if possible, treating [with Osman Digna] on the basis of his submission, and rendering himself answerable for the safety of the Berber road and

¹ For Graham's official despatch on El Teb see Graham to Hartington, 2 Mar. 1884, at the *Supplement to the London Gazette* dated 25 Mar. 1884. It is also cited at Col. R. H. Vetch CB, *Life Letters and Diaries Of Lieutenant General Sir Gerald Graham VC, GCB, RE*, (London, 1901), 375-382. For the official account of Tamai see Graham to Hartington, 15. Mar. 84, at the *London Gazette* dated 3 Apr. 84, or at Vetch, 390-396.

² A tolerably full description of the route is to be found at Col. the Hon. John Colborne, *With Hicks Pasha in the Soudan*, (London, 1884).

³ Graham to Hartington, 17 Mar. 1884, Egypt No. 12/1884, 176.

⁴ Baring to Granville, 24 Mar. 84; *ibid*, 186.

⁵ Granville to Baring 28 Mar. 84; see Egypt No. 13/1884 (Nos. 2 & 3), 1-7.

the protection of traders and other travellers.’¹ As political direction to the military goes, the proposition was more than naïve.

The Bija casualties at El Teb and Tamai had been so heavy that the back of the rebellion in the east could safely be counted as broken. All that remained was to harry the tribes with cavalry and press them politically to abandon their former allegiance and conclude a peace. Long-term pacification of the littoral appeared to be there for the taking. Possessed by his strongly held conviction that fresh imperial embroilments were best evaded, Gladstone not only vetoed any question of advancing on Berber, but also decreed that Graham’s force should immediately re-embark. Even before the last troopships had departed Suakin, Osman Digna was touring the desert, boasting of having driven the British back into the sea. Suakin alone was retained by a garrison of Royal Marines and Egyptians. Thus the Red Sea rebellion limped on, rendering the heavy loss of life at El Teb and Tamai both meaningless and morally reprehensible.

On 8 April, five days after Graham had departed for Suez, Granville indicated to Baring that the government was prepared to consider moving a detachment of troops up the Nile to Wādī Halfā.² Having consulted as instructed with Stephenson and Wood, Baring duly replied, ‘On the whole we are disposed to think that the objections to undertaking this movement outweigh the benefits likely to accrue from it. Those benefits are of a very doubtful nature.’ Indeed they were; by Wolseley’s reckoning old Wādī Halfā, (since submerged by the construction of the Aswan High Dam), lay 866 river miles from Khartoum.

Where Gordon’s affection for the Sudanese people³ demanded that he fulfil his mandate to deliver a tenable form of self-government, Gladstone, with his questionable grasp on the evils of fundamentalism and the threat to Upper Egypt, required only that he execute a policy of precipitate retreat and abandonment. There were no circumstances in which he was prepared to contemplate committing British troops to the Sudanese interior. Thus it came about that a principled general officer committed himself to standing by the responsibilities of public office even unto death. What Gladstone never quite grasped was that any British general appointed as Governor-General of the Sudan would probably have behaved in much the same way. It was not Gordon who made the troops come: rather it was the Queen Empress, the Conservatives, the political columnists and cartoonists, the Secretary of State for War, the Adjutant General and the thousands of ordinary citizens who jeered and booed Gladstone wherever he dared show his face that summer. The tipping point came in late July, with the parliamentary summer recess fast approaching, when Hartington channelled a thinly veiled threat of resignation through Granville.⁴ His actions implied a willingness to establish a separate Whig voting bloc, with the concomitant risk that, sooner or later, the government would be brought down. If this came to pass Gladstone’s great personal crusade, the Franchise Bill, would sink without trace. The

¹ Granville to Baring, 21 Mar. 84, Egypt No. 12/1884, 181.

² Granville to Baring, 8 Apr. 84; Egypt No. 13/1884, 9.

³ See the *Pall Mall Gazette*, 9 Jan. 1884, 11-12, for W. T. Stead’s interview with Gordon, prior to his departure for the Sudan.

⁴ See Hartington to Granville, 31 Jul. 84, cited in Bernard Holland, *Life of the Duke of Devonshire*, [2 vols.], (London, 1911), i, 476.

Prime Minister had no choice but to give way. On 5 August 1884 he allowed a 'Vote of Credit' in the sum of £300,000 – funds sufficient to underwrite the despatch of 3,000 men to Dongola – to be tabled before the Commons.¹ It is broadly true to say that from that point on the Khartoum crisis passed out of the exclusive control of the Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary, to become the particular preserve of the Secretary of State for War. Egged on by the Adjutant-General, and aware that the overwhelming preponderance of public opinion was with him, Hartington was now determined to do the right thing by Gordon, whether his senior cabinet colleagues liked it not.

1.8 CONTEXTUAL REMARKS

From the outset, a primitive regional infrastructure, vast distances, hostile environmental conditions, poorly understood geography and a determined enemy combined to make the Sudan a difficult theatre of operations. Overlaid with the Khartoum conundrum the campaign planning problem became one of particular complexity, to the extent that the Gordon Relief Expedition was to manifest itself as one of the most testing operations mounted by the British in the second half of the nineteenth century. Command & Control was problematic, logistics were problematic, intelligence-gathering was problematic: in almost every military dimension, indeed, getting to Khartoum in time did not represent an easy proposition.

The Khartoum affair was a global news story in its day but, ever since it passed from current affairs into history, has been clouded by a tendency to romanticise its exotic setting, its epic character and its simultaneously heroic yet humiliating outcome. Add into the mix purported political betrayal, a series of desperate fights against the odds and the 'martyrdom' of a great British hero and the potential for myth to prevail over history becomes pronounced. If in addition to generalist history, the close military history of the Khartoum episode has also gone awry, this is far less likely to be attributable to either romance or happenstance.

Just as is the case today, our Victorian forebears also had to contend with a world in which selfishly motivated obfuscation of mismanaged public affairs was commonplace. The Wolseley journals make it plain that he considered himself cast in the mould of the 'great man', the predominant school of history at that time. While he was near the top of the military hierarchy, he was not yet at its zenith, and there was always the danger that Lord Roberts, C-in-C India from 1885, might dislodge him as foremost in the nation's estimation and supplant him as the natural successor to the Duke of Cambridge. There was also a strong likelihood that the Queen-Empress would press the candidacy of another royal duke, her third son, Prince Arthur, Duke of Connaught, who had followed an active military career, including command of the Guards Brigade at Tel-el-Kebir, much after the precedent of the Duke of Cambridge in the Crimea. It will therefore be necessary for the thesis to establish whether or not the true course of the Khartoum Campaign has been distorted by the long-sustained pre-eminence in British military circles of its commander. In this context it is important to note that Wolseley retained the post of Adjutant General until 1890, was C-in-C Ireland until 1895, (during which period his protégé Buller held the key post of AG), and

¹ Colvile, OH, i, 45.

eventually succeeded the Duke of Cambridge as C-in-C of the Army in 1895. He retired in 1901. Thus Wolseley continued to dominate Army affairs for another 16 years after the fall of Khartoum. He lived until 1913, though sadly his mental health went into progressively severe decline over the final decade of his life. Given a background of high-Victorian military power-play, the twin-strand motive for any obfuscation on Wolseley's part, reputation and ambition, seems clear. As is often the way with 'great men', he may simply have been cognitively incapable of acknowledging personal fallibility.

There are good grounds, then, for approaching the military history of the campaign anew, with the aim of establishing, from an objectivist standpoint, precisely what went wrong and why. As few failed campaigns are attributable to a single error, or to the actions of one individual, there may be several strands to the British failure. The end game must be an assessment of culpability which can be considered both impartial in its execution and faithful in its inferences to the historic reality of 1884-5.

Nobody with the Nile Expedition tried harder to save Gordon than Colonel Sir Charles Wilson, the expedition's head of intelligence; a thoughtful, scholarly officer with a first class brain and great expertise in the affairs of the Near East. He was, however, entirely without combat experience, somewhat reserved by nature and might possibly have been light on that most indefinable of qualities, personal charisma. It will become evident that to some younger officers these were sins. But it was Wilson who took command of the Desert Column when another of Wolseley's protégés, Brigadier-General Sir Herbert Stewart, was mortally wounded, and who subsequently battled his way through to Khartoum with *Bordein* and *Talahawiyeh* on the morning of 28 January 1885 – a date which should have marked Gordon's 52nd birthday. It was, as many generalist histories proclaim, 'Too Late!',¹ two days too late they assert, as Khartoum had been stormed in the early hours of the twenty-sixth. If, with the river at its seasonal low, it was surprising that the steamers had made it to the confluence of the Niles in the first place, it can be counted something of a minor miracle that Wilson and his men survived a return journey which saw both vessels founder deep inside enemy-held territory.

Some weeks later, Wolseley made a concerted attempt to pin the blame for the failure of the expedition on his chief of intelligence. The ways in which Wolseley contrived to have Wilson's 'failure' raised in the newspapers and enshrined in the historical record were simple yet devious. For a long time history has blithely accepted that the relief expedition amounted to the narrowest of misses; that it is a matter of recorded history that it arrived only 48-hours too late; that Wolseley did his best but was unlucky at the end. We have already reflected that it is plainly a militarily tenuous proposition to suggest that the arrival of 0.28% of Wolseley's command could ever be considered to represent the relief of Khartoum. Crucially, evidence deployed here will show that not even Wolseley thought of it in those terms, at the time he took the decision that would bring Wilson to the confluence of the Niles.

Even if it can be proved beyond reasonable doubt that Wilson was unjustly scapegoated, the possibility would still remain that it was all down to Gladstone's

¹ The expression is derived from the caption of an iconic front-page cartoon carried by *Punch*, showing an anguished Britannia arriving before Khartoum just as the Mahdīst hordes are pouring into the city.

procrastination and plain bad luck in the field. Perhaps Wolseley would be content enough with a verdict which left his generalship above criticism. But there is more to it than that: military campaigns are not prosecuted by prime ministers or colonels, but by general officers. Only if a Prime Minister has given militarily unachievable direction can be held directly to blame for military failure. In similar vein, it is rare indeed that a mere colonel can confound a 'four star' general's plan of campaign. Whether or not the actions of Sir Charles Wilson can be considered to have achieved this effect is the central focus of this research.

1.9 LEAD INTO CHAPTER 2

The next chapter undertakes a comprehensive review of literature and historiography. Because the research has been approached from an empiricist standpoint, participant accounts have been of central importance. Thus in addition to contemplating works of history, the chapter also pays particular attention to the context and reliability of published primary sources, such as journals, diaries and memoirs.

Chapter 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE, HISTORIOGRAPHY AND SOURCES

2.1 INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

While the military campaigns surrounding the Mahdīya (1881-98) have attracted a substantial literature, including a good many participant accounts, secondary coverage of the Nile Expedition as an operation of war is surprisingly sparse. In similar vein, while Gordon's standing as one of the great heroes of British history has attracted numerous lives, his biographers have inevitably been drawn to his career and character, the predicament in which he was placed by the Gladstone government and notions of betrayal and martyrdom, with the result that their works are not generally to be regarded as sources of serious contemplation on the close conduct of military operations. That is in no sense to dismiss Gordon biographies in blanket fashion, least of all the work of Bernard M. Allen, to whose work we will come at the appropriate point.

Before delving into the close detail and reviewing the most important primary sources in some detail, it will first be necessary to consider the campaign's wider historical context – including modern scholarly literature on matters such as British government policy in respect of the Sudan, power-play within the Victorian Army and the contemporaneous state of British generalship. Bound up with such issues is quite how modern scholars view Wolseley's credentials as a top flight commander and just how effective the 'Ring' command and staff system was in practice.

2.2 WIDER HISTORICAL CONTEXT

2.2.1 British Policy

The series of Parliamentary Blue Books entitled *Correspondence Respecting the Affairs of Egypt* contains much of the official correspondence transacted between key role-players, be they members of the London Government, British political or military representatives in Cairo, Gordon in Khartoum or Wolseley in the field. The salient references are to be found at the bibliography and are indispensable in comprehending the prevailing political and military scenarios at any given point.

Mekki Shibeika's *British Policy in the Sudan 1882–1902*, (Oxford, 1952), provides a close and coherent focus on governmental decision-making and policy in both Whitehall and Cairo. Shibeika traces the correspondence between key role-players, including the three-way traffic between Gordon, Baring and Granville, and in so doing provides an invaluable handrail in contemplating the political and strategic picture at any given point. For an inevitably brief account of the fighting in the Bayuda, Shibeika relies primarily on the official history of the campaign and Sir Charles Wilson's

book *From Korti to Khartum*, (London 1886), but does not opine one way or the other on any notion of a Wilson controversy.

A second major review of British policy has recently been authored by Fergus Nicoll, a journalist who has plied his trade in modern-day Sudan. His first contribution to the historiography of the era was *The Sword of the Prophet: The Mahdi of Sudan and the Death of General Gordon*, (Stroud, 2004), a work which draws extensively on the Sudanese national archive and which is both unusual and noteworthy for the attention the author devotes to the rise of Muḥammad Aḥmad from a Mahdīst Sudanese perspective. In the closer detail of this first work, Nicoll touches upon but does not extensively address the relief expedition.

Nicoll's second work, *Gladstone, Gordon and the Sudan Wars: The Battle over Imperial Intervention in the Victorian Age*, (Barnsley, 2013), is his attempt to address the view from a British perspective. He executes a comprehensive review of the Khartoum affair which has a great deal to commend it, perhaps most notably in terms of its strategic scope, elucidation of the contemporaneous political issues and various interesting digressions into articulations of contemporaneous opinion. The matter of recriminations is also addressed well.

Nicoll begins by framing his consideration of British involvement in the Sudan in the context of Gladstone's personal commitment to a 'policy' he characterises as, 'minimum engagement, zero responsibility'.¹ One would have to question whether in the circumstances pertaining in the 1880s this can legitimately be regarded as a policy or whether it should more appropriately be thought of as a personal dogma – a doctrinaire stance inevitably fated to become irreconcilable with both the British national interest and the duties of Gladstone's great office, from the moment Granville stumbled into permitting a serving British officer to be appointed as Governor-General of the Sudan. Indeed Nicoll admits as much when he observes, 'Inasmuch as there was a 'Sudan policy', it amounted to a bland refusal to be drawn in.'² It is doubtful given the ramifications of the so-called policy whether 'bland' is the most compelling adjective with which to describe it.

One of the central refrains in Nicoll's book is an iconoclastic attack on the Gordon legend, which sees the author taking repeated swipes at the general's character, competence and sanity, including a wholly inappropriate characterisation of him as the 'the quintessential mercenary'.³ In fact Gordon famously eschewed financial reward: in China he had at first declined to draw any kind of salary, so as to safeguard his operational independence of the imperial government, while as Governor of Equatoria he had spurned some four fifths of his rightful remuneration.⁴ Having taken a decided stumble with the word 'mercenary', Nicoll even goes so far as to mock sympathetic portrayals by Gordon's friends and contemporaries, describing a passage

¹ Nicoll, *Gladstone, Gordon and Sudan*, 2.

² Ibid, 20.

³ Ibid, 7-8. It is in the nature of Britain's historic and modern-day global role that many officers before and since Gordon have had to serve the national interest without the comforting sensation of having British troops at their back. Thus Nicoll runs the risk of deploying a widely insulting metaphor at this point.

⁴ See Byron Farwell, *Eminent Victorian Soldiers: Seekers of Glory*, (London, 1985), 108-9 (China), 116 (Equatoria).

written by Sir Gerald Graham as affording an 'almost embarrassing degree of reverence'.¹ Embarrassing to whom though? Not Sir Gerald Graham or the society in which he moved, evidently. It has long been commonly recognised that Gordon was flawed, temperamental, impulsive and eccentric, but that he also possessed many striking and admirable personal attributes besides. Nicoll's obvious hostility to the 'wilfully disobedient'² Gordon who, to draw on the author's hyperbole, had been 'inexplicably' promoted to major general,³ only to indulge in 'increasingly manic oscillation',⁴ 'manic scheming'⁵ and an 'incontinent stream...'⁶ of '...erratic and inconsistent proposals',⁷ does not exert a generally beneficial influence on his narrative or analysis but rather serves as a distraction. His is a portrayal devoid of the sympathy to which a general officer killed in action as a consequence of having being thwarted at every turn by the ponderous, overly cautious vacillations of his political lords and masters must in justice be entitled. It is in no sense revelatory that the cruel realisation that he amounted to nothing more than the gesture in Gladstone's gesture politics left the stranded general angry and embittered. That he should muse disrespectfully into his journal, in a fashion which would only ever see the light of day in the event of his death, is hardly to be considered surprising or controversial, but perhaps more importantly neither does it constitute an appropriate weapon with which to flay Gordon posthumously. For Nicoll, though, the general's 'sustained tirade of abuse' is 'libellous', 'wholly unfair' and, (somewhat missing the point of Gordon's plight), 'probably actionable.' What might equally be characterised as schoolboy sarcasm, most likely indulged in over a couple of the stiff brandy and sodas Gordon is known to have enjoyed of an evening, is, to Nicoll at least, evidence of 'a mind unravelling' – reflections which 'go well beyond satire into the realms of paranoia and delusion'.⁸

Of course the historian's view of Gordon's journal musings must inevitably flow from how he or she interprets the actions and ethics of Gladstone and Granville. It transpired that their 'policy' position embraced a wilful preparedness to abandon thousands of Egyptians and loyalist Sudanese soldiers to their fate, in a scenario wherein the higher command functions of the Egyptian military, in both Cairo and Khartoum, were vested in British officers. As was observed in the previous chapter, the Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary had failed to appreciate that the honour code of the Victorian military would undoubtedly have driven any British officer appointed as governor-general of the Sudan to act in much the same way as Gordon. Thus, however fascinating the latter's eccentricities, failings and errors of judgment might appear, they amount, ultimately, to little more than a red-herring. There was never an option for a nominally Egyptian governor-general, who happened also to be a British general

¹ Ibid, 44.

² Ibid, 7. This premise originates with Gladstone's disingenuousness; in truth no direct order to the effect 'come away now' was ever drafted, let alone received safely in Khartoum.

³ Ibid, 23. In fact promotion to major general was by seniority in this era.

⁴ Ibid, 64.

⁵ Ibid, 67.

⁶ Ibid, 59.

⁷ Ibid, 8.

⁸ Ibid, 113.

officer, to cut and run – to leave the stranded garrisons and loyalist citizenry to shift for themselves in the face of a ruthless fundamentalist enemy. Any holder of the Queen's Commission who had pursued so disreputable a course of action would have been relentlessly excoriated in the London press and left in no doubt that as far as 'society' was concerned he could count himself finished. It is perhaps instructive to recall that General Robert E. Lee, as a professional contemporary of Wolseley, Gordon and their ilk, once mused that, 'duty is the sublimest word in the English language.'

Leaving aside what in my view is a historically unsustainable assault on Gordon, Nicoll also aspires to the rehabilitation of the 'Grand Old Man', contending that, 'More than 130 years later...Gladstone still struggles to get a fair hearing, let alone the benefit of the doubt on the central questions of integrity and consistency in policy.'¹ Of course there is commonly very good reason for relative unanimity amongst historians, as well as every reason to doubt Gladstone's integrity, foremost amongst them his disingenuous attempts to obfuscate the Liberal administration's incompetent strategic management of the Sudan question. In consequence *Gladstone, Gordon and the Sudan Wars* is not without debatable revisionist overtones, if not indeed a number of distinctly doubtful points of interpretation which fortunately lie outside the scope of the present project, rendering it neither necessary nor desirable that they be debated *in extenso* here. The book does pay passing attention to the relief expedition, in particular to the so-called 'Battle of the Routes', the abortive railway scheme² and the crucial logistic role played by Thomas Cook & Sons,³ but ultimately conforms to the standard characterisation of Wolseley's operation as a narrow miss.⁴

It comes as something of a relief that Nicoll himself remarks, 'It might seem perverse to claim that Gordon's death and the failure of the expedition to pluck him from Khartoum amounted to a victory of any kind for the Prime Minister',⁵ as this obviates any pressing necessity that anybody else do so. The truth of the matter is that the Liberal administration presided over by W. E. Gladstone launched three separate Sudanese campaigns in the period February 1884-April 1885, operations which entailed no fewer than seven general actions and the resultant deaths of at least 10,000 human souls, most of them Sudanese. If this amounts to a 'victory' for a principled Liberal determination to avoid intervention in the Sudan, as opposed to the corollary, proof positive of the strategic incompetence of Gladstone and Granville, by far the more substantive issue, I confess myself unable to follow the hypothesis.

2.2.2 Wolseley, the Ring System and the Art of Command in the High-Victorian Army

For a wider perspective on Victorian campaigning one would generally turn to two 'classic' campaign anthologies: *Victorian Military Campaigns*, (London, 1967), which takes the form of a collection of learned monographs compiled under the editorship of

¹ Ibid, 5.

² Ibid, 95-100.

³ Ibid, 107.

⁴ Ibid, 131.

⁵ Ibid, 6.

Brian Bond, and Byron Farwell's *Queen Victoria's Little Wars*, (Newton Abbott, 1973), both admirably executed works, but neither of which operate at a level of detail which justifies considered exposition here. For the tactics of colonial warfare at this period the researcher can do no better than delve into Colonel C. E. Callwell's classic text, *Small Wars: Their Principles and Practice*, (London, 1896), of which more in Chapter 3. Central to tracing the development of British military thought in the Victorian era is a second Brian Bond title, *The Victorian Army and the Staff College 1854-1914*, (London, 1972), in which the most salient background material is to be found at Chapters 3 and 4. Bond reviews the Ring System, discusses Wolseley's preference for Staff College graduates¹ and also considers Colonel Edward Hamley's seven-year tenure as the Staff College Commandant, another subject to which we will return in due course.²

In considering the pick of modern-day scholarship on such subjects as Wolseley, the Ring and the art of command in the High-Victorian Army, the researcher is well advised to turn to a trio of distinguished professors with particular expertise in the field, namely Adrian Preston, Ian F. W. Beckett and Edward M. Spiers. As will be addressed later in the chapter, Preston made what is arguably the single most important contribution to the historiography of the campaign by virtue of having uncovered, transcribed and published Wolseley's 'lost' campaign journal. For the present, however, it will be desirable first to address an important Preston monograph which is to be found in *Swords and Covenants*, (London & New Jersey, 1976), a scholarly work compiled to mark the centenary of the Royal Military College of Canada (RMC). Preston's contribution is entitled *Wolseley, the Khartoum Relief Expedition and the Defence of India 1885-1900*, an essay which can fairly be considered to be one of the most incisive pieces of authorship on high-Victorian military power-play yet written. Preston's views on Wolseley the man will be returned to, but in the meantime it will suffice to say that he demonstrates a keener awareness of the great man's failings of character than any other scholar. At one point in the RMC essay Wolseley is accused of, 'cheap bourgeois habits and sinister Caesarism'.³ Whether or not Preston goes too far at times is an important question, but not one on which I yet feel either qualified or inclined to pronounce, except in so far as to acknowledge that the conduct of this research unquestionably led me closer to Preston's interpretation than other more benevolent portrayals of Wolseley.

Without ever justifying the argument in the sort of close detail which must inevitably be denied to an essay-length treatment, Chapter 4 of *Swords and Covenants* states plainly that the British military failure on the Nile was attributable to Wolseley. Indeed Preston encapsulates the operation as 'a patchwork of muddle and confusion'⁴ and observes how Wolseley 'turned all the savage force of his despair'⁵ on Sir Charles Wilson. Nonetheless he presents the extent of the failure in Wolseley's own terms, which is to say as a narrow miss by the usual margin of two days.⁶ In contemplating the

¹ Bond, *The Victorian Army and Staff College*, 129-131.

² Ibid, 131-3.

³ Preston & Dennis (eds.), *Swords and Covenants*, 97.

⁴ Ibid, 92.

⁵ Ibid, 101.

⁶ Ibid, 93.

consequences of failure on the Nile, Preston places emphasis on how unpopular and friendless Wolseley now found himself, an aspect of his life-story which he argues convincingly had been gathering pace from the beginning of the decade:¹ particular attention is paid, for example, to the controversy preceding his appointment as Adjutant General.² The second half of Preston's essay considers the rivalry, open hostility indeed, which developed between the Wolseley and Roberts 'rings', its implications for strategies of imperial defence and the various struggles of the 1880s and 90s for the most important military appointments.³

To turn next to the matter of Wolseley biographies, there are surprisingly few full-length treatments of his life and career. The first substantive effort was *The Life of Lord Wolseley*, (London, 1924), a joint endeavour by Major General Sir Frederick Maurice, he of the Ring, and Sir George Arthur, a former Household Cavalry officer. Acknowledging that they had known the great man in life, it is perhaps all the more disappointing that they turned out a work so nakedly flattering to its subject as not to require serious contemplation. On the other hand *All Sir Garnet: A Life of Field Marshal Lord Wolseley*, (London, 1964), by Joseph Lehmann, is an infinitely more worthy biography. To be fair to the author, Wolseley lived so full a life that it is just about impossible for biographies of a conventional length to delve into the complexities surrounding the Nile Expedition, but since it represented his swansong as a field commander and, moreover, was the one campaign which went badly wrong for him, Lehmann ought perhaps to have contemplated how and why he erred. While recognising that Wilson inherited a serious situation, the author is conformist in such interpretation as he offers. 'Wilson, more accustomed to desk work than leading men in the field, was running the army as no army should ever be run – by committee. A handful of senior officers were called in for regular consultation.'⁴ Here we see the transparent influence as a source of a junior KRRC officer called Percy Marling, to whose historiographical contribution we will come later in the chapter. The most recent biographical offering, *Sir Garnet Wolseley: Victorian Hero*, (London, 1999), by Halik Kochanski, is inclined to evade a 'warts and all' portrayal and is similarly conformist in respect of the relief expedition. Kochanski fails even to acknowledge that the commander of a failed expedition might conceivably have something to answer for and proceeds, without any offering justification of her own, to castigate her subject's scapegoat: 'Wilson's command was disastrous,' she pronounces.⁵

Where we find rather more even-handed biographical analysis of Wolseley's life and career, including his failings, is in the writing of Professor Ian F. W. Beckett of Kent University, one of the foremost modern-day historians of the high-Victorian military. From whatever familiarity with Wolseley's life and career I personally have accrued, it seems to me that the arrogance and vanity which positively beset his character, (but which he also seems to have been perfectly capable of concealing in

¹ Ibid, 103-6.

² Ibid, 109-111.

³ Ibid, 112-117.

⁴ Lehmann, *All Sir Garnet*, 372.

⁵ Kochanski, *Victorian Hero*, 167. Kochanski cites Marling's command by committee remark in justification of her assertion.

many of his everyday relationships), grew progressively worse over time. This is perhaps not unnatural in so naked and successful a careerist: thus the capacity to compare and contrast the inner man as both a younger general officer and a senior one is useful. In this context, by far the most impressive scholarly study of his first general officer's command is Beckett's *Wolseley and Ashanti: The Asante War Journal and Correspondence of Major General Sir Garnet Wolseley*, (Stroud, 2009), an Army Historical Society publication. It is noteworthy that even at this early stage of his service as a general officer, Wolseley was very obviously sensitive to criticism and straight away evinced a determination to shape history by having it written, in effect, to his dictation.

Having towards the conclusion of the campaign become aware that two of the accompanying war-correspondents had books in preparation, namely H. M. Stanley of the *New York Herald* and Winwood Reade of the *Times*, Wolseley encouraged his military secretary, Henry Brackenbury, an officer much given to supplementing his pay with the proceeds of his literary endeavour, to write a campaign history of his own. Drawing freely on his chief's official correspondence, Brackenbury produced a competent and comprehensive two-volume effort in the remarkable time-frame of something around five weeks. In so doing he successfully beat his two competitors into print, which was almost certainly the primary object of such herculean endeavour. All three books are cited in the bibliography. As it turned out, Brigadier-General Sir Archibald Alison, the tactical level commander, pressed a formal complaint about Brackenbury's publication of his hasty battlefield notes to Wolseley, documents which, quite reasonably, he did not consider to abide in the public domain. The affair generated a bad-odour at Horse Guards and did harm to Brackenbury's immediate prospects of promotion.

In a compilation of learned monographs entitled *Leadership and Command: The Anglo-American Military Experience Since 1861*, (London, 1997), edited by the now Professor Gary Sheffield, Ian Beckett contributes *Command in the Late Victorian Army*, an essay focused in large part on Wolseley and the 'Ring' system. Amongst other compelling observations, Beckett offers commentary on the relationship between Wolseley and Buller, in their respective capacities as commander and chief of staff on the Nile,¹ and concludes that the effectiveness of Wolseley's command style decreased in proportion to the scale of operations.² Interestingly, Beckett also attributes significance to the fact that Wolseley identified Lee, who commanded after the fast-fading 'personal' style, and not Grant, more inclined to utilise a structured general staff system, as his personal hero.³ The further development of the Wolseley-Buller relationship and, as it were, the climactic phase in the game of Victorian military power-play are well traced in two monographs incorporated into *The Boer War: Direction Experience and Image*, (Abingdon, 2000), edited by John Gooch, namely

¹ Sheffield (ed.), *Leadership and Command*, 49-50.

² Ibid, 51.

³ Ibid, 51.

Buller and the Politics of Command by Beckett,¹ and *Wolseley and the South African War* by Kochanski.²

There is further coverage of Wolseley's admiration for Lee and Jackson in Beckett's *The Victorians at War*, (London & New York 2003), as well as some interesting observations on the place of Confederate generalship in British military thought up to the 1920s. This was primarily a function of Colonel G. F. R. Henderson's³ military classic, a two-volume biography of 'Stonewall' Jackson, having been retained as a Staff College set text until well after the Great War, a minor piece of stagnation which Beckett observes elicited the scorn of both 'Boney' Fuller and Basil Liddell-Hart.⁴ *The Victorians at War* is thematically structured in order to review a number of significant military issues of the era for the benefit of a wider readership. One such theme, found at Chapter 9, is *War Truth and History*⁵ in which Beckett uses the Anglo-Boer War to demonstrate the sometimes heated struggles waged between generals, their supporters and their critics to resolve who would emerge well from the 'official' version of history, a matter of some significance in the context of the Nile Expedition. Amongst other things, Chapter 18, an essay entitled *War Technology and Change*,⁶ contains a number of important observations on the growth of British military professionalism in the late nineteenth century.

The Late Victorian Army 1868-1902, (Manchester University Press, 1992), by Edward M. Spiers, presently Professor of Strategic Studies at Leeds University, is one of the most compelling texts in its field and, together with *The Victorian Soldier in Africa*, (Manchester University Press, 1992), serves as an indispensable handrail in any study of the period. In the first of these books, commissioned by Professor Beckett as the general editor of a series of works, Spiers contemplates by chapter such compelling subjects as 'The War Office',⁷ 'Organization of the Army',⁸ 'Officers',⁹ 'Arms, Tactics and Training',¹⁰ and 'Colonial Campaigning'.¹¹

In the closer detail, Spiers addresses authoritatively a good many themes of relevance to this research, including the competition between the Wolseley and Roberts Rings,¹² the difficult relationship between Wolseley and Cambridge,¹³ the impact of the Franco-Prussian War on British military thought¹⁴ and the developing importance in military affairs of war-correspondents.¹⁵ Spiers then delves into close tactical matters with rare authority, addressing such themes as the evolution of

¹ Gooch (ed.), *Boer War: Direction Experience and Image*, Ch. 3, 41-55.

² Ibid, Ch. 4, 56-72.

³ Henderson had been the Professor of Military History at the Staff College.

⁴ Beckett, *Victorians at War*, 4.

⁵ Ibid, 83-92.

⁶ Ibid, 178-190.

⁷ Spiers, *Late Victorian Army*, Ch. 2, 29-57.

⁸ Ibid, Ch. 3, 58-88.

⁹ Ibid, Ch. 4, 89-117.

¹⁰ Ibid, Ch. 9, 237-9.

¹¹ Ibid, Ch 10, 271-304.

¹² Ibid, 68-70.

¹³ Ibid, 70-1.

¹⁴ Ibid, 246-8.

¹⁵ Ibid, 194-8.

infantry tactical practice,¹ the changing role of cavalry,² the development of firepower in the infantry³ and artillery⁴ arms, fire control⁵ and the tactics of fighting in square.⁶ There is also consideration of Gordon,⁷ substantially in the context of his evangelism, which incorporates in passing the usual observation to the effect that the relief expedition arrived only two days too late.⁸

The Victorian Soldier in Africa embraces two chapters set in Sudan, including one devoted exclusively to the Nile Expedition.⁹ The latter takes the form of a basic narrative of events, accompanied by general commentary, which Spiers generally supports with short quotations from soldiers' letters home, many of which their respective families turned over to the local newspaper for publication. In the minor detail one would have to take issue with two of the author's assertions. The first of them is to the effect that Captain Lionel Trafford, Royal Sussex, was the officer who set off in a rowing-boat to alert friendly forces to the fact that Wilson's command had been left stranded on Mernat Island, following the foundering of the steamers, whereas in fact it was Lieutenant Edward Stuart-Wortley.¹⁰ The second questionable proposition is that the Royal Sussex detachment had worn red coats on the voyage upriver, an assertion which Spiers supports by referring to Trafford's diary. While Trafford certainly had to borrow red undress frocks from other regiments, in order to be prepared to comply with Wolseley's order to march through the streets of Khartoum in British scarlet, there is no definitive statement in his diary, or for that matter in any other primary source directly associated with a participant in the river dash, to suggest that red was actually worn on the journey upriver. On the other hand, Stuart-Wortley is known to have written a letter which incorporates an unequivocal statement to the effect that they were not worn on the journey and, as far as he knew, had gone down with the steamers.¹¹ Though seemingly an insignificant detail, it is nonetheless a matter of some relevance in terms of the iconography of the imperial era.

Turning more particularly to generalship, the researcher can usefully turn to two useful modern reviews of the subject, the first of which is Byron Farwell's¹² *Eminent Victorian Soldiers: Seekers of Glory*, (London, 1985), a book rendered doubly relevant in that two of its chapters are devoted to compelling biographical pen pictures of Wolseley and Gordon. The second work of similar ilk is *Victoria's Generals*, (Barnsley 2009), edited by Professors Steven J. Corvi and Ian F. W. Beckett, which incorporates monographs on Wolseley (Corvi), Wood, (Stephen Manning), Buller

¹ Ibid, 250-2.

² Ibid, 256-260.

³ Ibid, 238-241.

⁴ Ibid, 241-3.

⁵ Ibid, 290-1.

⁶ Ibid, 289-290.

⁷ Ibid, 183-4.

⁸ Ibid, 183.

⁹ Spiers, *Victorian Soldier in Africa*, 112-131.

¹⁰ Wilson, *Korti to Khartum*, 207-9.

¹¹ Cited in Sir George Arthur, *The Story of the Household Cavalry*, [2 vols], (London 1909), ii. 691.

¹² Farwell is also the author of a well-known popular overview of Victorian campaigns entitled *Queen Victoria's Little Wars*, (Newton Abbott, 1973).

(Stephen M Miller), Colley (Beckett), Gordon (Gerald Herman), Roberts (André Wessels) and Kitchener (Keith Surridge). In a conventional survey of Wolseley's career, Corvi dwells only fleetingly on the Nile Expedition, perhaps somewhat underplaying its significance in the life-story of his subject and conforming perhaps too cosily to Wolseley's own perception of his life and career in which the failure on the Nile was not of his making.¹ When it comes to the course of events in the Sudan, some of the other essays are not without blemishes in the detail. Surridge, for example, incorrectly asserts that Kitchener was Wolseley's chief of intelligence.² Herman similarly errs in stating that Wilson (who was) warned of a large Mahdist force blocking the Bayūda; that 'Lieutenant Colonel' [sic] Burnaby was nominated to lead the onward advance from Metemmeh;³ that Captain Lord Charles Beresford RN and Sir Charles Wilson had both been wounded in the Bayūda fighting; and that Lord Hartington was the prime mover in subsequent British disengagement.⁴ Miller, for his part, perfectly sound on Buller and the Ladysmith campaign, the self-selecting mainstay of his essay, demonstrates a less convincing grasp on his subject's role in the Bayūda Desert, stating that he considered making a 'decisive strike at Abu Klea', a curious operation to have mounted against what was by then a defended outpost on the British lines of communication.⁵ In similar vein the unsubstantiated observation, 'Buller seems never to have been too interested in the campaign' cannot be justified by any source evidence I have encountered; indeed, evidence and argument will be deployed later in the thesis to suggest that Buller was not only fully engaged, but was demonstrably a mental leap ahead of his commander as the unforeseen climax of the campaign stalked ever closer.

A generally worthy treatment of the Wolseley Ring on campaign is to be found at *The Ashanti Ring; Sir Garnet Wolseley's Campaigns 1870-1882*, (London, 1985) by Colonel Leigh Maxwell. The work's sub-title, though, somewhat belies the inclusion of the Anglo-Zulu War and the Transvaal Rebellion across four of ten chapters as, notwithstanding the presence of individual members of the 'Ring', these were not Wolseley-led operations. By closing his book in 1882, with the climax of the Egyptian intervention, Maxwell arbitrarily excludes the Nile Expedition, a matter of more immediate relevance to his ostensible subject, arguably somewhat devaluing the balance of the work.

2.2.3. History of the Sudan Campaigns.

There were five significant nineteenth century histories of the Sudan campaigns. The first in the sequence was W. Melville Pimblett's *The Story of the Soudan War*, (London, 1885), a work so quick into print that many of the most valuable primary sources had not yet surfaced.⁶ Relying as it does only on official despatches and newspaper copy,

¹ Corvi & Beckett (eds.), *Victoria's Generals*, 22.

² Ibid, 196.

³ [Full] Colonel Burnaby was to have been left at Metemmeh as the town commandant.

⁴ Corvi & Beckett (eds.), *Victoria's Generals*, 156-7.

⁵ Ibid, 60.

⁶ The preface was signed off on 19 Apr. 1885.

Pimblett's history inevitably lacks depth and errs in numerous points of detail. Nor had the Wilson controversy yet broken, as a result of which it incorporates no discussion of the purported delay in executing the steamer dash.

Thomas Archer's four-volume *The War in Egypt and the Soudan*, (London, 1887), benefits from the passage of eighteen months or so, allowing it amongst other advantages to draw on Wilson's *From Korti to Khartum*. It is unreferenced, however, save in so far as it incorporates extensive quotations from which are generally attributed within the text. Archer provides extensive coverage of the Mahdīst Uprising and specifically devotes his fourth volume to the Nile Expedition. Wilson's assumption of command at the Battle of Abu Kru is noted by Archer in a much more measured tone than would later be utilised in the respective memoirs of Colonel Sir Percival Marling VC and Lieutenant General the Earl of Dundonald, an important strand in the literature of which more shortly.

*The command devolved upon Sir Charles Wilson as the senior officer, whose appointment had been rather to the direction of the intelligence department, and to what may be the called the military scientific duty of exploration, enquiry, and topographical information, than to direct duty on the field. Not a moment was lost, however, and Sir Charles showed both tact and judgment in asking the next senior officer, Colonel Boscawen, to take executive command of the square.*¹

While Archer also devotes some attention to the state of the Desert Column after Abu Kru and draws extensively on Wilson's *From Korti to Khartum* in recounting the story of the steamer dash, he does not enter into a debate on the merits of Wolseley's campaign plan or the part played by Wilson in its denouement.²

Cassell's History of the War in the Sudan, (London, c.1890), was authored by the historian James Grant. The work is extensively illustrated but, like Archer's, does not incorporate source referencing. Coverage of the relief expedition is to be found in Volume III, Chapters VII to XV. The battle narratives are tolerably accurate in as much as they draw extensively, but inevitably too narrowly by the standard of our own time, on Bennet Burleigh's *Daily Telegraph* copy. In discussing the steamer dash, Grant suggests that Wilson might have started, '...in so far as is known, on the evening of the 21st, as Lord Charles Beresford had already had the two principal steamers overhauled, and all requisite repairs done; but from first to last procrastination seems to have been the spirit pervading the Relief Expedition.'³ We shall see when we come to the contribution of the newspapermen that any notion that the steamers were overhauled before 23 January is simply not true: a good example of a historian falling prey to the confusion occasionally enshrined in officers' official reports. At the end of his description of the river dash Grant remarks, 'Into the difference of opinion that arose respecting the action of Sir Charles Wilson we cannot enter here, for reasons

¹ Archer, *War in Egypt and Soudan*, iv, 64.

² Ibid, iv, 89.

³ Grant, *Cassell's History*, iv, 129.

that are apparent.¹ Chapter 4 will show that the controversy was still in full swing when Grant went into print.

Major Reginald Wingate's² *Mahdiism and the Egyptian Sudan: Being an Account of the Rise and Progress of Mahdiism and of Subsequent Events in the Sudan to the Present Time*, (London, 1891), is a work of importance, based as it is on everything he learned as a key member of the intelligence staff in Cairo. It incorporates a good deal of data relating to the *Mahdiyya* which is not to be found in any other published source. In particular it incorporates statements from participants in the siege of Khartoum, including those of Bordeini Bey,³ an eminent Khartoum merchant, and the Feki Medawi,⁴ a Mahdīst amīr turned defector. Still at that time a middle-ranking serving officer, Wingate does not enter into any of the controversy surrounding the relief expedition. Indeed he covers Wilson and the river dash simply by quoting the official history at length.⁵ It is also true to say that Wingate was engaged at the time of publication in creating conditions in which British public opinion would swing behind a campaign of re-conquest.

Charles Royle's *The Egyptian Campaigns 1882–1899*, (2nd Edition,⁶ London, 1900), covers a great deal of history, from Alexandria to Omdurman. A lawyer by profession, Royle's epistemology is empiricist in style and rises well above the standard of the other early histories. The end result is a serious and credible military history, notwithstanding the author's failure either to source his text or to append a bibliography. Royle's narrative can be considered to be broadly supportive of Wilson, although once again there is no structured or compelling vindication of his actions.

*It would be too much to imagine that if the subaltern's guard which Wilson had at his disposal had reached Khartoum while it still held out, it could (notwithstanding Gordon's expectations to the contrary) have changed the fortunes of the day, or have induced the Mahdi to carry out his idea of raising the siege and returning to Obeid.*⁷

Royle goes on to conclude that the failure of the expedition can be traced partly to, 'the insufficient supply of camels to the Desert Column,' but primarily to, 'the Government which so long delayed despatching the Relief Expedition, and then, as if to make its failure the more certain, sent it by the wrong route.'⁸ At an earlier point in the text Royle makes clear just how great Wolseley's influence had been in the selection of the expedition's axis.⁹ Thus he was the first historian to suggest, at least by inference, that Wolseley had something to answer for. He had, however, been

¹ Ibid, iv, 134.

² Later Governor-General of the Sudan.

³ Wingate, *Mahdiism* [sic], 163-172.

⁴ Ibid, 190-4.

⁵ Ibid, 173-188.

⁶ An extension of his original work, undertaken so as to incorporate Kitchener's operations of 1896-8.

⁷ Royle, *Egyptian Campaigns*, 385.

⁸ Ibid, 386.

⁹ Ibid, 314.

preceded by a member of another profession, the war-correspondent Archibald Forbes, whose contribution we will come to shortly.

Moving now into the mid-twentieth century, A. B. Theobald was the first author to pen a substantive post-war history of Mahdīsm, with his *The Mahdiya: A History of the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan 1881–1899*, (London, 1951). This is a fully referenced and authoritative modernist history running from the start of the uprising to the reconquest. Wolseley's campaign is afforded only 16 pages of coverage, however, and while Theobald's narrative is both thoughtful and accurate, he chooses not to address any close military detail or debate the controversy over the expedition's outcome.

Only one author in the post-war period devoted a book exclusively to the story of the relief expedition, a fact which affords *England's Pride: The Story of the Gordon Relief Expedition*, (London, 1963), by Julian Symons, particular significance in terms of historiographical review. This fact alone necessarily implied that it was one of three key works which the present project would have to surpass, if it was to abide in the realms of originality. Although Symons was primarily a crime fiction writer, *England's Pride* is a worthy popular history which gives no indication that its author was anything other than a competent historian. Symons recognises that Wolseley attempted to scapegoat Wilson, but on the other hand finds the latter's reasons for delaying his departure from Metemneh, 'not wholly convincing.'¹ At the same time he perceives that there were failings in the execution of the campaign plan, which he then proceeds to attribute to the absence of a general staff system and the obvious fact that the army commander could not be everywhere. Wolseley does not entirely escape criticism at Symons's hands, as for example in the remark, 'He showed also, in the last weeks before Gordon's death, a strange and uncharacteristic inability to act as a Commander-in-Chief.'² It is fair to observe, though, that these are merely passing observations in the book's closing chapter and do not amount to a substantive examination of the reasons for failure or who, ultimately, was to blame.

Michael Barthorp's *War on the Nile: Britain, Egypt and the Sudan 1882–1898*, (Poole, 1984), and Henry Keown-Boyd's *A Good Dusting: The Sudan Campaigns 1883–1899*, (London, 1986), were both popular illustrated histories published to coincide with the centenary of Gordon's death. Both are sound general histories, but in addressing the full gamut of the Sudan campaigns can devote only a limited amount of space to the Nile Expedition. Keown-Boyd takes Wilson's side in the matter of the delay at Metemneh, devoting four well-reasoned paragraphs to reasons why the pause can be considered justifiable. On the other hand his account of the Battle of Abu Klea goes awry in identifying Captain Lord Charles Beresford RN as the, 'prime culprit, at least chronologically', in the breaking of the square. This is an unfair assertion and is most likely based on a misinterpretation of Beresford's memoirs.³ Additionally Colonel Fred Burnaby is accused of wheeling two HCR companies out of the rear face, although the reality is that he wheeled out a half-company only. Keown-Boyd does not address the alleged procrastination by Wilson at Abu Kru. Barthorp similarly errs in placing the

¹ Symons, *England's Pride*, 272.

² Symons, *England's Pride*, 287.

³ The misapprehension would probably not have cropped up as frequently as it has, if more historians had taken the trouble to access Beresford's official report.

naval machine-gun at the left-rear corner of the square, but in so doing does not point the same accusing finger at Beresford. He is not overtly hostile to Wilson but then again does not digress from a wide-ranging narrative to contemplate the controversy.

In *Khartoum: The Ultimate Imperial Adventure*, (London, 2005), Michael Asher, a writer of popular fiction and former soldier who lived in the Sudan for a decade, digresses into history to cover the course of the Mahdīya across two decades. What sets Asher's book apart from other post-war literature is that he devotes far more space to the fighting in the Bayūda than his predecessors. On occasion he errs in processing primary source material, while, in keeping with the popular genre, poetic licence and unproven assertions are also occasionally deployed. For example, Asher recounts Beresford's story of the shotgun-wielding officer in the scrimmage at Abu Klea, but incorrectly identifies him as Lieutenant Alfred Pigott RN;¹ in fact Beresford was actually writing of the infantry officer Captain Charles 'Bloody-minded' Pigott. Wilson, Asher tells us, was a lieutenant colonel,² but of course succeeded to the command of the Desert Column because he was the only full colonel (by brevet) amongst a clutch of lieutenant colonels. Sir Redvers Buller, as if he were not hard enough beset in the pages of history already, was, according to Asher at least, 'a constant thorn in the side' of Wolseley, and, 'far gone in alcoholism'.³ This bespeaks a failure to grasp the close relationship between Buller and Wolseley, a relationship set to continue long after 1884-5. It is doubtful whether either of these strident assertions could ever be fully substantiated on the basis of the available source evidence. Certainly Buller had a fondness for champagne and is known to have had a significant stock of it in his baggage; then again he was a major general and would have been expected to entertain his staff subordinates from time to time. Similarly, while Wolseley certainly criticised Buller in the privacy of his campaign journal, he was subject to no more than the passing denigration also afforded to Wood, Butler, Brackenbury, Wilson, Swaine and other members of the army staff.

More substantively Asher mounts a robust defence of Wilson, dismisses Wolseley's criticisms of him and makes a number of telling points about operational planning, an exercise he conducts over five pages.⁴ In general terms at least, this is the same territory which the present project explores. It is in the nature of a popular history that assertions are often made but not proved, as is the case with elements of Asher's narrative. Something of the same propensity is carried into the author's short review of the campaign. A sweeping judgement, repeated elsewhere in the secondary literature, occurs when Asher observes, 'Certainly Wolseley had been let down by Sir Redvers Buller, who had not provided enough camels.'⁵ The evidence deployed here, in the discursive chapters, will show that if anything the shoe was on the other foot. Nonetheless Asher represented another of the three extant works of literature which it would be necessary to strive to surpass.

¹ Asher, *Khartoum*, 223-4.

² *Ibid*, 185-6.

³ *Ibid*, 185.

⁴ *Ibid*, 275-280.

⁵ *Ibid*, 278.

It is not merely for the sake of completeness that this review also addresses a collection of monographs, edited by Edward M. Spiers, entitled *Sudan The Reconquest Reappraised*, (Abingdon, 1998). Produced to mark the centenary of the Battle of Omdurman, the work incorporates a series of particularly high-grade essays, including *Kitchener and the Politics of Command*, by Ian Beckett,¹ and *Campaigning under Kitchener*, by Spiers himself.² While these interesting contextual chapters could technically be considered to fall outside the scope of the present project, there are also two other chapters which enjoy more immediate relevance. The first of these is *British Correspondents and the Sudan Campaigns 1896-98*, by Dr Hugh Cecil,³ which is of interest in that several newspapermen who had covered the earlier Sudan campaigns also returned there for Kitchener's culminating campaign. Amongst them were Bennet Burleigh, Frank Scudamore, Charles Williams, Frank Rhodes and Frederic Villiers, of whom more in a moment. We learn from Cecil that the attempt made by Villiers to film the Battle of Omdurman with an early mark of movie camera proved sadly unsuccessful, due to accidental exposure of the film. *The Battle of Omdurman in the Context of Sudanese History*, by the veteran Arabist Peter Clark,⁴ is likewise a valuable monograph, not for any passing mention of Omdurman, but rather for the quality of its insights into Mahdism as a Sudanese religious phenomenon.

Moving finally into the present century, Gabriel Warburg's *Islam, Sectarianism and Politics in the Sudan since the Mahdiyya*, (University of Wisconsin, 2002), its title notwithstanding, does devote some space to the rise of Muḥammad Aḥmad, but for the present purpose is of passing interest only. *Armies of God: Islam and Empire on the Nile 1869-1899*, (London, 2007), by Dominic Green, is a worthy enough derivative history, though not to the extent that it warrants any significant exposition here.

2.3 BIOGRAPHIES

Thomas Wright's *The Life of Colonel Fred Burnaby*, (London, 1908), offers many fascinating insights into Burnaby's character and adventures but is of little interest in any wider context. It does, however, incorporate a primary account of Abu Klea by Lord George Binning which is not to be found anywhere else.

The most pertinent of the biographies warranting consideration is *The Life of Major General Sir Charles William Wilson*, (London, 1909), authored by Colonel Sir Charles Watson RE, who like his recently deceased subject had been a close friend of Gordon's. Watson's life of Wilson not unnaturally devotes a good deal of coverage to the Khartoum episode, but by dint of his friendship with Wilson can reasonably be regarded as partisan. Even so, Watson makes some telling points in respect of how Wolseley intended the operations of the Desert Column to play themselves out once Metemmeh had been seized. Interestingly, Gordon's last mail-bag, brought downriver by the steamer *Bordein*, contained two letters addressed to Watson which Wilson opened and read on 21 January. The later of the two was dated 14 December and ran:

¹ Spiers (ed.), *Reconquest Reappraised*, Ch. 2, 34-53

² Ibid, Ch. 3, 54-81.

³ Ibid, Ch. 5, 102-127.

⁴ Ibid, Ch. 10, 202-222.

My Dear Watson,

I think the game is up and send Mrs Watson, you, and Graham my adieux. We may expect a catastrophe in the town in or after ten days' time. This would not have happened (if it does happen) if our people had taken better precautions as to informing me of their movements. But this is 'spilt milk'. Good bye. Mind and let my brother (68 Elm Park Road, Chelsea) know what I owe you.

*Yours Sincerely
C. G. Gordon¹*

This letter enjoys great significance in that it shows that Gordon expected Khartoum to fall between Christmas and the New Year, a key point which will be returned to in subsequent chapters. Having concluded his coverage of Wilson's part in the campaign, Watson moves on to describe how Wolseley required that he justify his actions and how subsequently he received many expressions of support.² Probably the principal value of the biography is the insight it gives into Wilson's quiet dignity and intellect.

Given Buller's prominent role in the high-Victorian Army, he has been the subject of surprisingly few biographies. The first into print, and certainly the most relevant in the context of events in the Sudan, was Colonel C. H. Melville's *The Life of General Sir Redvers Buller*, (London, 1923). The significance of Melville's work lies in the fact that he cites items of correspondence sent by Buller from Wādī Halfā and Korti to his wife Lady Audrey. These letters constitute key source evidence from a vital phase of the campaign and will be returned to in the discursive chapters.

Perhaps the most pertinent Gordon biography is Bernard M. Allen's *Gordon and the Sudan*, (London, 1931). What sets Allen above the commonplace is that he travelled to Khartoum to interview Sudanese eyewitnesses to the siege, including one of Gordon's servants. He also interviewed Colonel Sir Rudolf Slatin Pasha and Major General the Hon. E. J. Stuart-Wortley, both of whom had been at Khartoum on 28 January 1885, the former a prisoner in the Mahdī's camp and the latter aboard one of Wilson's embattled steamers. Additionally Allen incorporates a short appendix on the subject of Wilson's delay in setting off with the steamers. Though he believes the delay was not justifiable, he contends that it was more attributable to Beresford than to Wilson. This is not a commonly encountered postulation and will merit further exploration within the thesis.

2.4 THE OFFICIAL HISTORY

The official record of the Nile Expedition is to be found at Colonel H. E. Colvile's *History of the Sudan Campaign*, (London, 1889), a three-volume work compiled under the auspices of the Intelligence Division of the War Office. Colvile, a Grenadier Guardsman, had participated in the campaign as a member of the Intelligence Department and had

¹ Watson, *Life of Wilson*, 313.

² Ibid, 349-351.

completed his draft by March 1887, at which point it left his hands. Publication was then subject to a two-year delay, while the draft was circulated for comment and revision.¹ In the interim the Intelligence Division had been taken over by the newly promoted Major General Henry Brackenbury. On the Nile, Brackenbury had been successively DAAG General Staff under Buller, then chief of staff to Major General Earle and, finally, the brigadier-general commanding the River Column in succession to its deceased leader.² A central figure in the Wolseley Ring, Brackenbury was also widely regarded as its keenest brain. There is no direct evidence to suggest whether or not Wolseley was personally involved in reviewing and revising Colvile's manuscript, but, as the Asante Campaign had showed, he could in any case count on Brackenbury's literary discretion. Interestingly, the official history of the Egyptian Campaign of 1882, authored by Colonel Frederick Maurice RA, another leading member of the Ring, (later Wolseley's first biographer), was also released under Brackenbury's authority in 1887. One of the most avid readers of the finished version of Colvile's history was Archibald Forbes, arguably the most highly regarded war-correspondent of the age, to whose observations we will come in due course.

Quite how Colvile's history touches on Wilson and the steamer dash will be explored in Chapter 4. Leaving aside the question of Wolseley's hold over Brackenbury and Colvile, the official history is a monumental work, embracing a wealth of data on the organizational and administrative conduct of the Nile Expedition. What it does not do, unsurprisingly, is offer any criticism of Wolseley's thinking or decision-making; indeed it emphasises the virtues of his plan. At the same time it is not hostile to Wilson, although overt criticism would not have been allowable once the Queen Empress, the C-in-C and the Secretary of State for War had all lent him their unequivocal support, as they did in the second half of 1885. It is of note that the Volume III map-pack contains the map drawn by C. E. Fowler, the British railway engineer who had surveyed a route across the Bayūda in the 1870s. Ironically the railway project, which would have seen a line constructed from Wādī Halfā to Khartoum, had been terminated by Gordon, on grounds of profligacy, during his first tenure as Governor-General.³ The significance of Fowler's map, with its careful notations on the availability of water, is that it was used by Stewart and his officers during the trans-Bayūda crossing.

2.5 KEY PRIMARY SOURCES

2.5.1 Gordon's Journals

Gordon's journals are indispensable in understanding how the situation at Khartoum developed over time, from emergency to crisis. Edited by A. Egmont Hake, they were published as *The Journals of Major-Gen. C.G. Gordon, CB., at Kartoum [sic] printed*

¹ See Brackenbury's preface, dated Nov. 1889, at Colvile, OH, i.

² Maj. Gen. William Earle, commanding the River Column, was killed in action at Kirbikān.

³ Lt. Col. E. W.C. Sandes DSO, MC, RE, *The Royal Engineers in Egypt and the Sudan*, (RE Institute Chatham, 1937), 100-101.

from the original MSS, (London, 1885). It is of note that Gordon's brother Sir Henry, (also a Crimea veteran), prefaced them as follows:

Very severe criticisms have been made upon the manner in which Sir Charles Wilson carried out the duties which had been entrusted to him, with regard to communicating with General Gordon at Kartoum [sic]. The charges made against him may be with advantage restricted to two:

First – The delay in not proceeding to Kartoum at the latest on the morning of the 22nd; and

Second – In not having pushed on to Kartoum itself in order to ascertain General Gordon's fate beyond a doubt.¹

After briefly headlining some of the difficulties confronting Wilson, Sir Henry closed his remarks with, 'Consequently I cannot but express my feeling that on neither head of charge does any blame attach to Sir Charles Wilson.' This was powerful support from someone whose opinion mattered but, as Chapter 4 will demonstrate, this was not the end of the matter, nor did it amount to a reasoned or conclusive vindication of Wilson.

The letters of Frank Power, the 25-year-old *Times* correspondent and temporary British consul in Khartoum, provide a useful supplement to Gordon's journal. They were published by Power's brother under the title *Letters from Khartoum Written During the Siege*, (London, 1885). Power was killed in the abortive Abbas breakout, prior to which it had for some time been impossible to get letters out, so that his correspondence only has a bearing on the first few months of the siege. Up to the Abbas breakout (10 September 1884),² responsibility for maintaining a record of the siege had rested with Gordon's aide, Lieutenant Colonel J. D. H. (Hammill) Stewart, 11th Hussars, who took his papers downriver only for them to be lost in the ensuing disaster. Hence Gordon's journals run only from 10 September-14 December. Famously they expose his innermost thoughts, disparage the ethics of the Gladstone government and give an insight into his sense of duty and frame of mind which is both fascinating and moving. The last volume was closed by Gordon on 14 December, at which point he sent it downriver with the steamer *Bordein*. Wilson would be the next Briton to cast his eyes over the six reunited volumes, but would not get to do so until 21 January, not quite six weeks after Gordon had made his final entry.³

2.5.2 Orders Book and War Diary of the Desert Column

Without doubt, the most significant documentary discovery made during the course of archival research was that of the original Orders Book and War-Diary of the Desert Column.⁴ It will be helpful to introduce the subject here, but for the avoidance of duplication the discovery of the documents is further addressed at Appendix D.

¹ Hake (ed.), *Gordon Journals*, p. lxi.

² Ibid, 2.

³ Col. Sir Charles Wilson KCMG, CB, *From Korti to Khartum*, (London, 1886), 110-112.

⁴ National Archives of Scotland, GD16/52/57/10, vols A & B.

2.5.3 Official Despatches

As usual despatches of note are to be found in the *London Gazette*. Graham's reports on the First Suakin Campaign are incorporated in the 25 March, 27 March and 3 April editions of 1884. Sir Herbert Stewart's despatch¹ on the Battle of Abu Klea is at the 20 February edition of 1885 and is accompanied by Wilson's intelligence report of the same day. Wilson's report on the Battle of Abu Kru is in the 10 April edition. A crucial report written by Stuart-Wortley on 1 February 1885, the significance of which will be addressed in a later chapter, is to be found in the 10 March edition.² The same edition also incorporates a report by Lieutenant Colonel Mildmay Willson, Scots Guards, who assumed command of the Desert Column in the absence upriver of his namesake. Captain Lord Charles Beresford's official report, *Report of Proceedings of the Naval Brigade from November 26 last to March 8, 85* is in the 28 April edition.³

2.5.4 Magazine Accounts by Military Participants

Five significant magazine articles written by officer participants were identified:

- a. Lt. Douglas Dawson, *Sir Herbert Stewart's Desert March*, November 1885 edition of *The Nineteenth Century*.
- b. Lt. H. M. Lawson, *Desert Notes from Korti to El Goubat*, RE Journal, vol. xv, (1885).
- c. Capt. R. F. T. Gascoigne, *To Within a Mile of Khartoum*, July 1885 edition of *The Nineteenth Century*.
- d. Col. Hon. Reginald Talbot, *The Battle of Abu Klea*, January 1886 edition of *The Nineteenth Century*.
- e. Dr Thomas Heazle Parke, *How General Gordon Was Really Lost*, May 1892 edition of *The Nineteenth Century*.

Lieutenant Douglas Dawson served in the Guards Camel Regiment (GCR) and provides a narrative account of the Bayūda crossing and battles, while Lieutenant Henry Lawson RE, the second-in-command of Royal Engineer detachment, provides a short diarised account of the sappers' part in the proceedings. Captain Fred Gascoigne was a more significant role-player in terms of cross-checking the narrative in Wilson's *From Korti to Khartum*, as he was one of the three British officers who accompanied him to the confluence of the Niles.

Gascoigne travelled from London to Jakdul Wells with the 'living legend' that was Colonel Fred Burnaby, the Commanding Officer of the Blues, who famously should

¹ Dated 18 Jan. 85.

² pp. 1026-8.

³ See also the 12 May and 25 Aug. editions for other reports of relevance.

not have been in the Sudan in the first place, the C-in-C having declined Wolseley's request for his services.¹ Burnaby had then applied for a long leave in South Africa, but instead promptly set off for the Sudan in company with his old regimental colleague. Gascoigne had spent a decade in the Blues, had never seen action and was no longer a regular officer. He did, however, hold a commission in a volunteer unit and was on the Reserve of Officers.² In quite what official capacity he was present in the Sudan, if any, is far from clear. He is certainly not to be found amongst the special service officers listed in Colville's history, nor do any other officer reservists appear to have been mobilised. On 11 December Burnaby had written to his wife from Dal, 'I sleep on the ground in a waterproof bag, and have as aide-de-camp Captain Gascoigne, late of my regiment.' Of course if the colonel's own presence was irregular, it follows that he cannot have had an officially appointed aide. While Burnaby was at Dal he is reported to have said to Mr J. R. M. Cook of Thomas Cook & Sons, (the firm contracted to move the troops as far as Wādī Halfā), 'If the British Government had not sent an expedition to Khartoum, I and my friend, Captain Gascoigne, would have gone out alone with the intention of cutting our way through to Gordon.'³ Wilson, for his part, remarked that Burnaby introduced Gascoigne as, 'a young man who knew his way about in the Sudan.'⁴

If as would appear to be the case Gascoigne's presence was every bit as irregular as Burnaby's, he was nonetheless accepted by the military hierarchy as just another officer serving in the Sudan. He showed conspicuous gallantry during the upriver dash and in the homewards fight at Wad Habeshi. In his account of the action at the confluence of the Nile, Wilson wrote, 'Gascoigne was as imperturbable as ever: he is about the coolest man under fire I have ever seen.'⁵ Evidently he was also a modest man, as his article *To Within a Mile of Khartoum* says nothing of the personal deeds of gallantry attested to by the writing of Wilson and Beresford. Importantly, Gascoigne's piece was published several months before *From Korti to Khartum*, guaranteeing that it was written without being swayed by Wilson's account.

The fourth article of note, *The Battle of Abu Klea*, was written by Lieutenant Colonel the Hon. Reggie Talbot, CO Heavy Camel Regiment (HCR), and constitutes a defence of his regiment's performance in the battle. HCR had been widely held to blame for the Mahdists' penetration of the square. Dawson's article had appeared in *The Nineteenth Century* two editions earlier and had evidently provoked Talbot. Dawson had recounted how, when the enemy got into the square, he had moved across to his brother Vesey for a farewell handshake. It was a curious thing to be bothered by, but Talbot remarked by way of riposte that it was his regiment doing the hand-to-hand fighting, not the Guards, and that he personally had not felt the necessity to draw either sword or revolver. It was a somewhat spurious point as the situation had in fact been so desperate that Sir Charles Wilson and other nearby

¹ In all likelihood the Duke's objection sprang from the fact that Burnaby as the CO of the Blues could not be considered available.

² *Hart's Army List 1885*, ii, 532f.

³ Wright, *Life of Burnaby*, 263-4.

⁴ Wilson, *Korti to Khartum*, 15.

⁵ *Ibid*, 178.

officers had been obliged to shoot down a knot of four anṣār with their revolvers, before they could hack the unhorsed General Stewart to death: Wilson, indeed, had dropped his man at three paces.¹ *From Korti to Khartum* had also appeared at the same time as Dawson's article, providing further grounds for Talbot to put pen to paper. Wilson had written, 'Those who were near the Heavies told me that as the men fired they moved back involuntarily – not being taught as infantryman are to stand in a rigid line; they thus got clubbed together...'.² Having stated his objection to the expression 'clubbed together', Talbot then launched into his own version of events, quite rightly emphasising that HCR had borne the brunt of the fight. It says much about Wilson's character that subsequent editions of his book incorporated the relevant passages of Talbot's article as an appendix. Nonetheless, there is an overwhelming preponderance of evidence that HCR's battlefield performance that day was unsatisfactory. It follows that Talbot's article reflects sins of omission and can only be regarded as subjective.

How General Gordon Was Really Lost appeared in May 1892 and was written by one of the medical officers with the Desert Column, Surgeon Thomas Parke. Because it is of direct relevance to the Wilson controversy, Parke's contribution is discussed in Chapter 4.

2.5.5 Verner, Trafford and Marling Diaries

Chapter 4 will also show that Sir Charles Wilson was the first of the military participants into print, with his book *From Korti to Khartum*, (London, 1886). It was based on his campaign journal and, in addition to being an important primary source, also serves as his basic defence. His status as a serving officer meant that he was unable to go onto the offensive, either by pointing out defects in Wolseley's campaign plan or by criticising its execution. As a result the defence he offers is strictly passive. Like all such evidence, Wilson's testimony must be tested for veracity. The best means of doing so is to be found in the diary kept by Captain Willoughby Verner, who served as one of Wilson's subordinates on the intelligence staff.³ He was to play a key role during the Bayūda crossing and was with or near Wilson throughout. Verner writes from the particular perspective of an intelligence officer, with the result that he focuses on enemy movements in a way which other primary sources do not. His observations only entered the public domain a decade ago, when James Whitaker made an invaluable contribution to the campaign's historiography by transcribing and privately publishing *The Military Diary of Colonel W.W.C. Verner*, (Leeds, 2003). Verner's diary contains so much close military detail that almost anything published prior to 2003 will have missed points of importance. For example, it is only in Verner that we learn that Wolseley's scheme to send Wilson upriver, ahead of the fighting echelon, was not in fact common knowledge as we might previously have imagined,

¹ Ibid, 29-30.

² Ibid, 34.

³ Whitaker (ed.), *Verner Diary*, 26.

but rather had been kept 'a profound secret from all.'¹ Wolseley's views on operational security are addressed in a later chapter.

The campaign diary kept by Captain Lionel Trafford, Royal Sussex, is housed at the West Sussex Records Office in Chichester.² There are in fact two Trafford diaries, a contemporaneous one and a later presentation copy for his regiment which he illustrated with water colours. Trafford was an important role-player, not only because he fought at Abu Klea and Abu Kru as a company commander, but even more so because he was in charge of the 20-man detachment which accompanied Wilson to Khartoum. While Trafford does not generally name names, neither does he fight shy of criticising his superiors. For example, it is possible, by a process of elimination, to tell that Trafford had been annoyed by Colonel Reggie Talbot's performance at Abu Kru. If Wilson's performance was also in some way unsatisfactory, it seems highly likely that Trafford would have reflected the fact, even if only obliquely. There are, however, no such references in the diary.

It would be easy to mistake the salient chapter of Colonel Sir Percy Marling's *Rifleman and Hussar*, (London, 1931), for a contemporaneously authored day-by-day record of events, demanding that it be covered under this heading. In fact it is clear that Marling's 'diary' was adapted in old age and should more appropriately be regarded as a set of memoirs.³ It is important to note that in the period 1884-5 he was a junior subaltern and thus not intimately involved at the brigade or column level of command.

2.5.6 Letters of Lord and Lady Wolseley

The correspondence between Wolseley and Lady Louisa is of great importance as a primary source as the general wrote in great detail about his daily proceedings and kept very little from his wife; rather less, indeed, than he seems to have kept from his staff. Consequently this important traffic allows historians to trace Wolseley's developing views on how the campaign was faring and, in the other direction, the sort of social circles within which the gossiping Lady Wolseley was active. The correspondence, it must be said, makes something of a nonsense of the strict enjoinders to secrecy espoused by Wolseley in *The Soldier's Pocket-Book for Field Service*, (London, 1871).⁴

The letters give an insight into the development of Wolseley's antipathy to Wilson. The first hostile reference, a single sentence only, occurs on 27 January 1885, when, in the aftermath of Abu Klea and from a range of 150 miles, Wolseley pronounced, 'Sir C. Wilson, very useful for the political work, is no soldier: this is his

¹ Ibid, 35. The passage in question refers to 13 Jan.

² See West Sussex Records Office (WSRO), Royal Sussex Regiment (RSR) 1/85 & 1/85a, (Trafford Diary/MS).

³ The most obvious giveaway relates to Mon. 19 Jan., which attracts two entries. Additionally, an anecdote describing how the *Daily Telegraph* correspondent, Bennet Burleigh, acquired the boots formerly sported by the deceased St Leger Herbert of the *Morning Post* places Marling himself in two places at once. There are also discrepancies between *Rifleman and Hussar* and a contemporaneous letter sent by Marling to his father.

⁴ See Wolseley, *Soldier's Pocket-Book*, 68, 74, 82 & 224.

first dose of fighting, and it has evidently hurt his nerves.’¹ He based this remark on the contents of a personal letter sent by Wilson to Lieutenant Colonel Leopold Swaine (Wolseley’s military secretary). It is worth observing, by way of essential context, that the fearless Wolseley regarded physical courage as the most vital of all soldierly attributes: thus any suggestion that an officer might, even for a moment, have felt a flicker of concern for his own safety was sufficient to attract his enduring contempt.²

Importantly, Wolseley also kept a daily campaign journal, which he was in the habit of sending home in the same envelope as his letters to Lady Louisa. His notes seem to have been intended to inform the autobiography he would one day commit to paper.³ At some point the journal pages relating to the Sudan were separated from Wolseley’s letters to his wife, so that while Sir George Arthur was able to bring a selection of the latter into the public domain, with the publication of *The Letters of Lord and Lady Wolseley (1870-1911)*, (London, 1922),⁴ the former disappeared without trace until they were located by Adrian Preston in the mid-1960s. Their reappearance and significance will become apparent from Chapter 4 onwards.

2.5.7 The Newspapermen

The advance into the Bayūda was accompanied by some of the best known special-correspondents of the age, including Bennet Burleigh (*Daily Telegraph*), Melton Prior (*Illustrated London News*), Frederic Villiers (the *Graphic*), Charles Williams (*Daily Chronicle*), St. Leger Herbert (*Morning Post*) and John Cameron (the *Standard*). The newspaper copy of the ‘specials’ constitutes primary source coverage, but nonetheless has hardly been broached since in the historiography of the campaign.

Burleigh, a Glaswegian by upbringing, was the doyen of the Bayūda press corps. As a young man he had involved himself in the American Civil War, fighting on the side of the Confederacy as a naval saboteur and ‘cloak and dagger’ man. More recently he had been with Graham at El Teb and Tamai and, as we have already seen, would later return to the Sudan for Kitchener’s campaign of re-conquest. He wrote books about both these campaigns, but curiously did not commit his thoughts on the Nile Expedition to paper, beyond, that is, his contemporaneous despatches to his editor and readers; the reason for this remains elusive. The death in action of John Cameron, a particularly perceptive observer, was a loss to history. Had he lived and gone into

¹ Wolseley to his wife, 27 Jan. 85; see Arthur (ed.), *Wolseley Letters*, 163.

² A consistent refrain in his campaign journals.

³ Adrian Preston observed that, ‘Judging from the pencilled marginalia, occasional excisions and heavy overwriting, it would appear that Wolseley intended publishing these journals, in part or in whole, as a sequel to the *Story of a Soldier’s Life* which in fact ends where the journals begin.’ It is hard to imagine that he would have published the Nile journal without a good deal more expurgation as its tone would have done Wolseley’s reputation no favours and might well have landed him in court. He is certainly unreasonably disparaging on Wood and Brackenbury, both of whom became important establishment figures and outlived him.

⁴ It should be noted that Arthur went to pains to bowdlerize the correspondence. In similar vein, Wolseley’s daughter, Frances, rendered a number of passages illegible by striking them through in pencil.

print with a full-length account of the campaign, it is much less likely that any obfuscation of key aspects of Campaign Management could have prospered.

Also present was a newcomer called Alexander Macdonald, representing the *Western Morning News*. Macdonald wrote an important memoir of the campaign called *Too Late for Gordon and Khartoum: The Testimony of an Independent Eyewitness of the Heroic Efforts for their Rescue and Relief*, (London, 1887). While Macdonald does not overtly criticise Wolseley's management of the campaign, he does reflect on the difficulties confronting Wilson as it reached its denouement and is in no sense hostile to him.¹ Indeed, in his preface Macdonald remarks, 'In fact a most unfair attempt was made to fix upon him the blame for what must ever be regarded as a great national disaster.'² Arguably, Macdonald is the only primary source to emphasise that the Desert Column was in no sense engaged in a dash for Khartoum when time ran out, a fact which this research embraces as a point of the first importance. While he expresses mild disapproval of Wolseley's criticism of Wilson,³ he draws to a somewhat lame close:

*Foreign military critics, especially those of Germany, have enthusiastically acknowledged all this, and have rightly accounted for its failure by the dilatoriness of H.M. Government in authorising its despatch. This was, indeed, the unfortunate cause which, despite the heroic efforts of its chief and the forces engaged under him in it, made the Nile Expedition too late for Gordon and Khartoum.*⁴

Thus, after touching on some key issues which might have steered him to a markedly different set of conclusions, Macdonald conformed in the end to the Wolseleyite version of history. This was not his last word on the matter however.

A decade later Macdonald returned to the subject with, *Why Gordon Perished: or the political and military causes which led to the Sudan disasters*, (London, 1896). With Kitchener about to embark on the re-conquest of the Sudan, Macdonald was probably hoping to cash in on a renewed spike in public interest. This time he drew on Colville's history and published official correspondence to offer closely reasoned criticism of both the Gladstone administration and Wolseley's plan of campaign. At this early date Macdonald did not have any of the early twentieth-century participant memoirs available as sources, though by far the greatest impediment was that he did not have access to Wolseley's side of the story as we do today. Nonetheless, *Why Gordon Perished* is the only substantive critique of the plan of campaign and as such it was essential that this thesis surpassed Macdonald's case with fresh material, observations and conclusions.

Of the other correspondents, Frederic Villiers and Melton Prior both published their memoirs. Villiers touched on the campaign in his *Pictures of Many Wars*, (London, 1902), *Peaceful Personalities and Warriors Bold*, (London, 1907) and a two-volume

¹ See in particular Macdonald, *Too Late*, 294-9.

² Ibid, p. [6].

³ Ibid, 332.

⁴ Ibid, 342.

autobiography called *Villiers: His Five Decades of Adventure*, (London & New York, 1920). Prior's reminiscences were entitled *Campaigns of a War-correspondent*, (London, 1912). In both cases the expedition was covered by a series of personal yarns, embracing few themes of significance. It also clear that their respective memories of the Bayūda operation were beginning to fade.¹

Interestingly, Prior claims to have been aboard the *Sāfia* when Captain Lord Charles Beresford RN steamed upriver to rescue Wilson and his party from Mernat Island.² This would have placed him at the Battle of Wad Habeshi, although the assertion is neither compelling, (there are no Prior sketches pertaining to what was a highly dramatic action for example), nor is it substantiated by any other source, least of all by Beresford himself, who took great pride in Wad Habeshi and incorporated a detailed account of the affair in his memoirs.³ Villiers' accounts of the fall of Stewart, the death of St Leger Herbert⁴ and the climax of Abu Kru, where he was the only correspondent to accompany the square, serve to afford him some limited significance as a primary source.

2.5.8 Memoirs and Autobiographies by Military Participants

The military memoirs covering the relief expedition are discussed below in various sub-categories. It should be noted that their dates of publication vary across a bracket from 1885-1944, although if we disallow General Sir Ian Hamilton's *Listening for the Drums*, (London, 1944), on the basis that he served only with the River Column, the bracket can be deemed to close more than a decade earlier with Major General Edward Gleichen's *A Guardsman's Memories: A Book Of Recollections*, (London 1932).

Sir Evelyn Wood was present from the outset as the first Sirdar. When Wolseley arrived in Cairo on 9 September 1884, he asked Wood to assume the role of GOC Lines of Communication. Wood's memoirs were published under the title *From Midshipman to Field Marshal*, (London, 1906). His account of his part in the Nile Expedition runs to 11 pages, but takes a personal tack and fails to offer any substantive comment on the conduct of the campaign: indeed Wilson does not so much as warrant a mention. Brackenbury and Colonel William Butler both went into print, not long after the conclusion of the campaign, with personal accounts of their experiences. Brackenbury's *The River Column*, (London, 1885), came first, to be followed by Butler's *The Campaign of the Cataracts*, (London, 1887). Neither officer dwells on events in the Bayūda, but rather both focus on the River Column. Given the strength of Wolseley's feelings at the time these books were being prepared, it is interesting that neither author offers any hint that Wilson was to blame for the campaign's unsuccessful outcome. They both followed up with autobiographical works in later life, in Brackenbury's case with *Some Memories of My Spare Time*, (London, 1909), and in Butler's with *Sir William Butler: An Autobiography*, (London, 1911). By the time these

¹ Compare, for example, Prior, *Campaigns*, 223, with Burleigh, *Daily Telegraph* report, 24 Jan. 85, in respect of carrying the wounded to the river.

² Prior, *Campaigns*, 225.

³ Beresford, *The Memoirs of Admiral Lord Charles Beresford*, [2 vols.], (London, 1914), ii, 295-313.

⁴ Villiers, *Five Decades*, ii, 66-7.

works were published, Wilson had been deceased (d. 1905) for some years but, even so, neither Butler nor Brackenbury felt the need to get anything off his chest in respect of Wilson. Butler also wrote a biography of Gordon, *Charles George Gordon*, (London, 1897), in which Wilson again escapes unscathed. That the senior members of the Ring, across the board, chose not to reflect their chief's condemnation of Wilson is at least noteworthy and potentially instructive.

Butler's books are works of importance as they describe in detail how he executed the whaler scheme on Wolseley's behalf. Although Butler is much given to self-aggrandizement, his autobiography reveals that he was intimately concerned in what would now be termed Campaign Design, when in April 1884 Wolseley first turned his mind to military options: 'With him I had many interviews after my return [from Canada]...and we discussed at length the various routes by which Khartoum could be reached by troops.'¹ As the champion and chief executive of the whaler scheme, Butler had a vested interest to safeguard in his memoirs, but he was a colourful, florid author and wrote with the kind of energy that sometimes led to him exposing the contradictions inherent in his own case.

*At Korti began that singular bend in the river which carries it, for a distance of 160 miles, in an opposite direction to its proper north course. Not only did this change of direction double the distance from Korti to Berber, but some sixty miles beyond Korti a second series of rapids began, neither the nature nor extent of which were known to the modern world.'*²

That a stretch of the main axis was 'unknown to the modern world' was not something that had ever been briefed to ministers.

Captain Lord Charles Beresford RN began the campaign as Wolseley's naval ADC, but later commanded the small naval brigade assembled for the purpose of overhauling and crewing Gordon's steamers once a rendezvous had been effected. As a naval captain, Lord Charles was one of the most senior officers with the Desert Column and was concerned in most of the decision-making which followed Sir Herbert Stewart's demise. His memoirs covered the events in the Bayūda at some length, sold well and have been extensively tapped in the production of secondary literature, not always beneficially. It is of note that almost 30 years had elapsed before *The Memoirs of Admiral Lord Charles Beresford*, (London, 1914), went into print, and that the book is once again focussed on the author's personal experience, rather than the conduct of the campaign. It is important that it is not read in isolation, but rather in conjunction with Beresford's official despatch, *Report of Proceedings of the Naval Brigade from November 26 last to March 8, 85*.³ It is also noteworthy that the latter account contains an important passage which is not only erroneous but disingenuous. As we have seen in the case of James Grant, it has certainly led historians astray in the past and might yet do so again. The British rendezvoused with the steamers on 21 January, at which point Wilson decided to conduct a downriver reconnaissance the following

¹ Butler, *Autobiography*, 271.

² Butler, *Campaign of the Cataracts*, 234.

³ *London Gazette*, 28 Apr. 85.

day. Beresford had to be helped on board, as a result of a boil on the backside so severe that he was barely able to stand. Nonetheless he felt no qualms about reporting to the Admiralty as follows:

After some repairs to the engines reported the steamers ready to proceed to Khartoum at 3 p.m. Took command of Gordon's steamers. Proceeded to Shendy, distance seven miles, in 'Bordein' and Tull-Howeiya,' [sic] taking Bashi-Bazouks [sic] and the crews I found in the vessels. Fired a few shells into Shendy and cleared a small earthwork. Received no opposition.¹

In reality Beresford spent most of the day lying down² and the steamers were commanded that day by Wilson and Verner.³ The real problem with the report, however, lies in its first sentence where, as Alexander Macdonald took pains to point out, a falsehood of some significance occurs:

Lord Charles Beresford unaccountably exaggerates the part he played in the proceedings of this day...he was also inaccurate in stating at the same time that he had on the 22nd reported the steamers ready for Khartoum, for to my personal knowledge the naval artificers did not touch them until the following day, and Lord Charles, when I called his attention to the matter, frankly acknowledged his error in date and said that I was correct in my statement.⁴

Sixty Years of a Soldier's Life, (London, 1912), the autobiography of Major General Sir Alfred Turner, is of note as its author was present at Korti as a major in the Intelligence Department. Of particular interest are Turner's observations on Buller's response to the state of Stewart's camels, following his forced march to and from Jakdul Wells,⁵ remarks which will be cited in a later chapter.

The only regimental officer to pen a full-length treatment of his service with the Camel Corps was Lieutenant Count Edward Gleichen, who had been a subaltern in No. 1 Company GCR and would later rise to be a divisional commander in the Great War. In *With the Camel Corps up the Nile*, (London, 1888), Gleichen covers his experiences at far greater length than any other junior or middle-ranking participant. Thus his book constitutes one of the classic primary sources for the Nile Expedition. Written by a serving officer yet to attain field rank, it is not the place in which to find damning criticism of either full colonels or full generals. It nonetheless offers many interesting insights into events in the Bayūda. Gleichen went on to write a set of memoirs in later life, entitled *A Guardsman's Memories: A Book of Recollections*, (London, 1932). Now a retired general, he was free to offer an opinion on events he had witnessed the best part of half a century earlier:

¹ Ibid, 1915.

² Wilson, *Korti to Khartum*, 120.

³ Whitaker (ed.), *Verner Diary*, 64.

⁴ Macdonald, *Too Late*, 301.

⁵ Turner, *Sixty Years*, 99-101.

Lord Wolseley subsequently maintained that this delay of two days was fatal to the whole expedition, that Wilson ought to have started on the 22nd, and that he would thus have been in time to rescue Gordon. Those who maintain the contrary (myself included) point out that Wilson could not have started then....The point will of course, never be cleared up; but my private opinion is that nothing but a miracle would have made any difference...Two weeks earlier would have made a difference, but two days – no. The real causes of failure were, first, delay on the part of Mr. Gladstone, and second, an insufficient supply of camels.¹

Although there is no substantive discussion of the conduct of the Nile Expedition in what is after all an autobiography, Gleichen's life does at least contain a clear-cut expression of opinion that Wilson was not to blame for the campaign's failure. The corollary, that if the blame did not rest with Wilson at the tactical level, then it must in all probability have lain at the operational level, is not touched upon. Instead, in the final sentence of the extract cited above, we see an excellent example of how the thinking of military men had been tutored to bypass Wolseley's role at the operational level and default to the villainous Mr. Gladstone, a greatly unloved figure amongst the high-Victorian officer corps.

My Army Life, (London, 1926), by Lieutenant General the Earl of Dundonald,² and *Rifleman and Hussar*, (London, 1931), the memoirs of Colonel Sir Percival Marling VC, should be addressed together as both works contained criticisms of Wilson which served to breathe life back into the controversy more than 40 years after the fall of Khartoum. Gleichen's memoirs of 1932 succeeded those of Marling and Dundonald, but took an opposite tack. Between them these three works effectively draw the primary source coverage of the Desert Column's operations to a close. Still to enter the public domain at this juncture were Wolseley's campaign journal (1967) and Verner's diary (2003). Additionally, the War Diary and Orders Book of the Desert Column, together with significant MS accounts by Lieutenant Thomas Snow and Sergeant Charles Williams DCM, have been broached here for the first time.

Dundonald had been a company officer in No. 1 Company HCR and would later go on to command Buller's cavalry in the Ladysmith Campaign. In *My Army Life*, written more than 40 years after his adventures in the Sudan, Dundonald devotes 46 pages to his service with the Desert Column. Unsurprisingly, given the intervening passage of time, some curious anomalies crop up; he remarks for example that the Camel Corps was armed with Remingtons, whereas it actually carried Mark II Martini-Henrys. Even so, Dundonald deploys plenty of interesting and accurate detail, suggesting that he might well have been working from a personal journal or diary. In cueing up Wilson's time in command he remarks:

Colonel Sir Charles Wilson, whose work had been Staff and Intelligence, now took command; he was not a soldier in the Stewart sense, but an office man: he

¹ Gleichen, *A Guardsman's Memories*, 38-9.

² Until he inherited his father's title, shortly after the fall of Khartoum, Dundonald was known as Lord Cochrane.

*did his best and took advice from several young Colonels, some of ability like Lieut.-Colonel Mildmay Willson of the Scots Guards, but his failure was in asking the advice of too many, without a real soldier's instinct in sifting what he imbibed.*¹

In describing Abu Kru, Dundonald states, 'After what seemed a waste of some hours of invaluable time, Sir Charles Wilson at length decided to take out a force and carry out Sir Herbert Stewart's plan of establishing ourselves on the Nile.'² Here, then, is a clear inference of needless procrastination on Wilson's part – a period in which a great many men were killed and wounded by small arms fire. At a later point Dundonald criticises Wilson's decision to abort the 21 January attack on Metemmeh.

*The great mistake made by Sir Charles Wilson on this day was to show his teeth and then not bite; it disheartened our men and emboldened the enemy. Once embarked on the enterprise it was folly to leave the town in the enemy's hand untouched, close to us and our line of communication, a centre for enemy forces, and from which nightly large bodies of men issued and marched close to our bivouac beating defiance on their tom-toms.*³

Nor was this the end of Dundonald's sniping: at page 52 we get, 'The gallant cool-headed soldier was gone, his place taken by an estimable man who was only a soldier as far as his uniform went.' Six pages further on Dundonald remarks, 'We had lost our gallant leader Stewart, in whom we all had confidence. Sir Charles Wilson, who succeeded him, had been for a long time in a quasi-civilian employment in charge of map-making. He was not accustomed to lead men.'⁴

Marling had been a junior officer in 3rd KRRC and by the autumn of 1884 had already acquired a great deal of combat experience by dint of his service in the Majuba and First Suakin Campaigns. On the Nile he was a subaltern in A Company, the Mounted Infantry Camel Regiment (MICR), an experience recounted within his autobiography in a diarised format. There is nothing to suggest that his original diary is archived anywhere, so that it is impossible to distinguish with certainty between passages he wrote at the time and observations added to the text up to four decades later. While Marling does not belabour the point in quite the same way as Dundonald, he also makes it clear that he had a low opinion of Wilson. In the entry relating to Abu Kru he describes him as, 'rather an old woman who doesn't know anything about drill, and funks the responsibility.'⁵ Marling also mirrors Dundonald in returning more than once to the notion that the Desert Column ended up being commanded by committee. He first notes, 'The joke of the whole thing is that everyone gives their opinion and advice in the freest manner, from the junior subaltern upwards, and the man who gets

¹ Dundonald, *My Army Life*, 47.

² *Ibid*, 47.

³ *Ibid*, 51.

⁴ *Ibid*, 58.

⁵ Marling, *Rifleman and Hussar*, 136.

Wilson's or Boscawen's ear last, his advice is followed.'¹ On 20 January he notes, 'We are now run by a committee – Wilson, Boscawen, two Barrows, Charlie Beresford, and David Airlie.'² This is clearly an aspect of the Wilson controversy which will require closer examination.

A MS account by Lieutenant Thomas Snow³ of D Company MICR, entitled *Mounted Infantry in the Desert Campaign*, is lodged with the National Army Museum and offers a good deal of interesting information about the organization of MICR and its role in the fighting. Snow's company commander was Captain Charles Berkeley 'Bloody-minded' Pigott who, as Chapter 4 will relate, was to play a central but not formerly obvious role in the Wilson controversy. Snow's account serves as the best insight we have into Pigott's character.

The only book written by a non-commissioned participant in the Gordon Relief Expedition was *My Six Years with the Black Watch*, (Boston, 1929), by John Gordon, a former corporal who had fought at Tel-el-Kebir, El Teb, Tamai, Kirbekan and Giniss. Again written more than 40 years after the fact, Gordon goes well beyond a 'voice from the ranks' type memoir, by reflecting intelligently on the political background to the Gordon mission. Other less high-brow but nonetheless worthwhile accounts by non-commissioned personnel include those of Private Harry Etherington of 1st Royal Sussex,⁴ Private William Burge of the Guards Camel Regiment (GCR)⁵ and an unpublished MS account by Sergeant Charles Williams DCM of the Medical Staff Corps, kindly made available for the present project by his descendants.⁶

2.5.9 Other Miscellaneous Primary Sources

With Hicks Pasha in the Soudan, (London, 1884), by Colonel the Hon. John Colborne, has nothing directly to do with the Nile Expedition, but nonetheless exerts a bearing on any consideration of alternate courses of action. Colborne had been a member of Hicks Pasha's staff, but in the end had not accompanied the ill-fated Kordofan Expedition. His book provides a detailed account of how Hicks and his officers travelled the Suakin-Berber caravan road, in company with a body of several hundred Egyptian troops, and provides much useful data on the route's viability accordingly.

As the British Consul-General in Cairo, Lord Cromer, (at the time Sir Evelyn Baring), was a central figure in the Khartoum crisis. His memoirs were published under the title *Modern Egypt*, (London, 1908) and are indispensable in understanding the political context of the Gordon mission. His extended character sketch of Gordon is particularly compelling and seems to encapsulate his more curious personality traits admirably.

The well-known accounts of the Mahdi's European prisoners, principally *Ten Years Captivity in the Mahdi's Camp 1882–1892*, (London, 1893), by Father Joseph

¹ Ibid, 136.

² Ibid, 137.

³ Later a divisional commander on the Somme.

⁴ See E. Milton Small, *Told from the Ranks: Recollections of Service by Privates and NCOs of the British Army 1843–1901*, (London, 1901), 195–206.

⁵ See Ian Knight, *Marching to the Drums*, (London, 1999), 220–228.

⁶ Toy Family Private Papers.

Ohrwalder, and *Fire and Sword in the Sudan*, (London, 1896), by Colonel Sir Rudolf Slatin, are of use in tracing events from the Mahdist side of the siege-lines but have little direct bearing on the conduct of the relief expedition. Their most important aspect is that they establish Muḥammad Aḥmad's approach to siege warfare, based on the precedent set by the five-month siege of El Obeid.¹

Important to understanding the situation in the Red Sea Littoral are: *'83 to '87 in the Soudan with an account of Sir William Hewett's Mission to King John of Abyssinia*, (London, 1888), by Augustus Wylde;² *Three Months in the Soudan*, (London, 1885), by Mrs Ernestine Sartorius;³ and *Desert Warfare: Being the Chronicle of the Eastern Soudan Campaign*, (London, 1884), by Bennet Burleigh.

2.6 OFFICIAL DOCUMENTS, REPORTS AND ARMY LISTS

Report on the Egyptian Provinces of the Sudan, Red Sea, and Equator, Compiled in the Intelligence Branch, Quartermaster General's Department, Horse Guards, War Office (revised to July 1884), (HMSO, London, 1884), was a pocket-sized guide to the Sudan, intended to be carried in the field. The report breaks all the major routes into legs, measured in miles, and describes the availability of water. It is thus of great utility in assessing the viability of the Suakin-Berber caravan road (see Appendix A). In the summer of 1883, Lieutenant Colonel Hammill Stewart, later to be appointed as Gordon's aide, had been present at Khartoum gathering intelligence for the Foreign Office. He not only prepared the data for the Intelligence Branch report replicated at Appendix A, but also wrote his own independent report in which he provides a great deal of topographical data on late nineteenth century Sudan.⁴

For biographical details of officers the thesis has relied primarily on the 1879 and 1885 editions of Hart's *New Annual Army List*. The 1877 and 1884 editions of *Field Exercise and Evolutions of Infantry* are indispensable in understanding British tactical practices at this period.

2.7 REFERENCE WORKS AND REGIMENTAL HISTORIES

Richard Hill's *A Biographical Dictionary of the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan*, (Oxford, 1951), was plainly a labour of love and can be counted as one of the seminal reference works on Sudanese history. Indeed this thesis has relied on Hill for Arabic transliteration.

Numerous regimental histories embrace operations in the Sudan, the most pertinent of which are listed at the bibliography. The Royal Engineers are unusual in having been afforded a volume devoted entirely to the Corps' efforts in the Sudan. *The Royal Engineers in Egypt and the Sudan*, (RE Institute Chatham, 1937), by Lt. Col. E. W. Sandes, is of note for its depth and the excellence of the accompanying maps (see Map 4). Because Gordon was a Royal Engineer, Sandes considers his mission and defence of

¹ The provincial capital of Kordofan.

² A long term British resident at Suakin.

³ The wife of Val Baker's second in command.

⁴ See Egypt No. 11/1883 [C3670], a parliamentary blue book devoted in its entirety to Stewart's report.

Khartoum in some detail. In examining the issue of the delay at Gubat he merely reiterates the reasons Wilson gave in justification of his actions.

2.8 SUMMARY OF HISTORIOGRAPHY

Sir Charles Wilson's actions were keenly debated in the summer of 1885. By far the most virulent item of anti-Wilson literature was a magazine article entitled *How We Lost Gordon*, which appeared in the May 1885 edition of the *Fortnightly Review*. It had been written by the *Daily Chronicle* correspondent, Charles Williams, and was signed off at Korti on 9 March. Thus it was written in the immediate environs of Wolseley's headquarters, some six weeks after the fall of Khartoum. For reasons we will come to in Chapter 4, it is likely that Williams was reflecting the privately articulated views of Wolseley and his closest staff officers. Chapter 4 will also show what actions Wilson took to repudiate Williams's accusations, culminating with the publication of *From Korti to Khartoum*.

Colville's Official History was completed by March 1887, only to be tinkered with at the War Office over the ensuing two years. The inclusion of 'Sir C. Wilson's Explanation of Delay at Gubat'¹ is arguably the Official History's most controversial element, but whether it was always present or was added later is presently unknown and likely to remain that way. At around the same time that Colville had originally declared his work complete, the war correspondent Alexander Macdonald published *Too Late for Gordon and Khartoum*. Macdonald used measured language to suggest that the campaign plan had incorporated flaws. The final manipulated version of the Official History was scrutinized over the course of 1891 by the best known of the high-Victorian war correspondents, Archibald Forbes, who went into print in the January 1892 edition of the *Contemporary Review* with *The Failure of the Nile Campaign*, an article no less strident in its criticism of Wolseley's campaign plan than Charles Williams had been in belittling Wilson. The argument had run out of steam by the end of Victoria's reign. It was resurrected when the subalterns and captains of the Camel Corps wrote their memoirs in the 1920s and 30s. After that it was over to the historians, primarily in the generalist and popular domains, where many interpretations hostile to Wilson have arisen.

As has already been remarked, probably the most significant historiographical contribution to the military history of the relief expedition came in 1967, when Adrian Preston unearthed Wolseley's campaign journal. In combination with his personal letters to Lady Louisa, the journal leaves historians in the fortunate position of being able to trace many, if not all, of the major elements in Wolseley's direction and management of the campaign. Thus the commander's side of the story, articulated in his own words, has survived down to the present day and serves *ipso facto* both as the case for the prosecution against Wilson and a defence of the campaign plan at the operational level.

While the Gordon legend has led to numerous dissections of his life, career and character, the military campaign to save him has resided in the background and received only fleeting attention. It has attracted only one full-length popular history, in

¹ See Colville OH, ii, Appx. 46, 267-9.

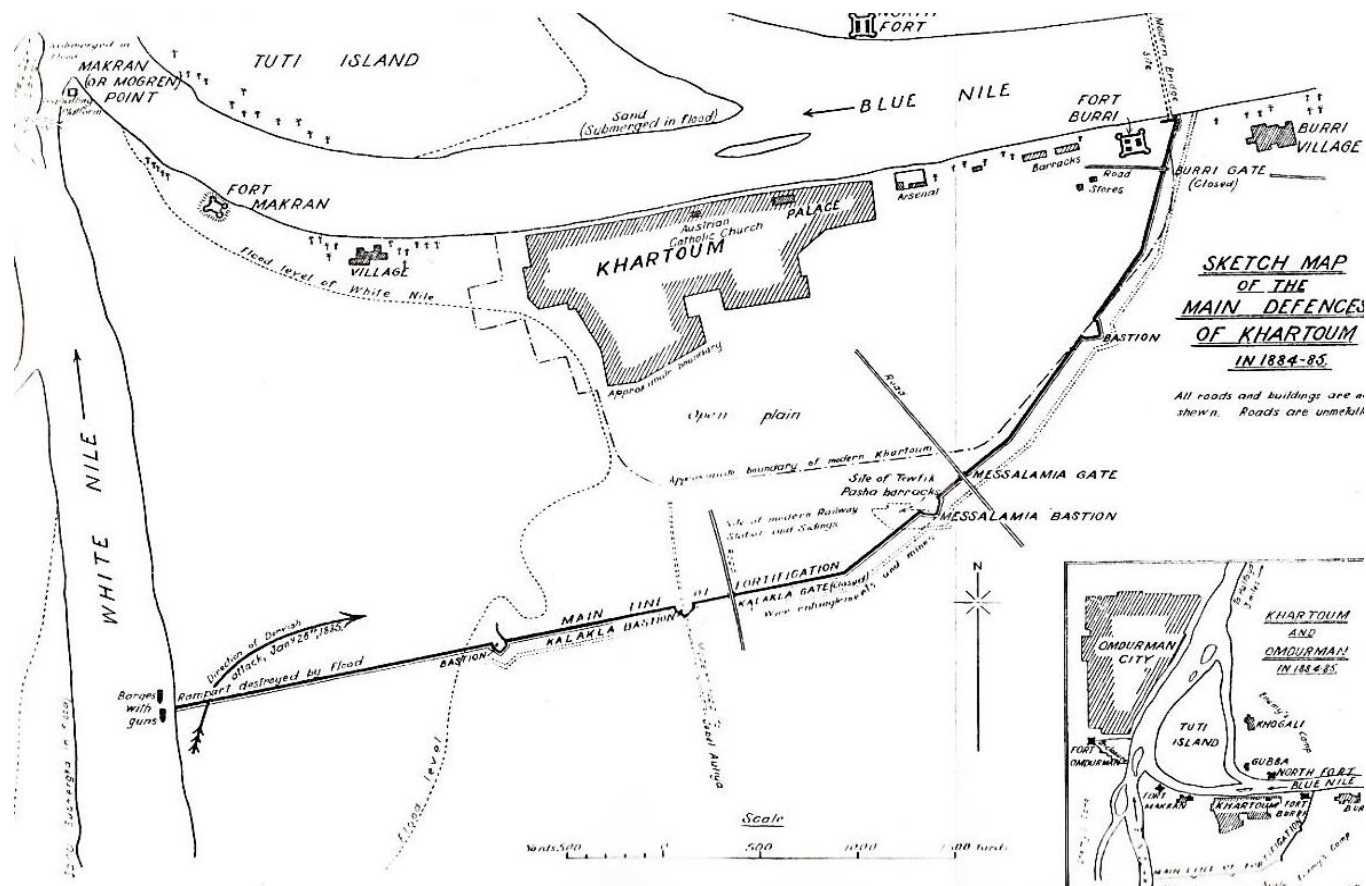
the form of *England's Pride* by Julian Symons. As a result of this gap in the historiography of the siege and fall of Khartoum, the Wilson affair has remained substantially unresolved down to the present day.

2.9 LEAD INTO CHAPTER 3

The next chapter describes methodology. Usefully, current British doctrine reminds us that successful practice of the Operational Art, 'requires professional development that includes the realistic, critical study of past campaigns and battles and the realities of war, in order to learn relevant lessons for the future.'¹ The first half of the chapter identifies and reflects upon the underlying ontological philosophy, before then proceeding to justify the adoption of an empiricist approach to the research question. It next goes on to consider such methodological tools as military-historical rationalism, and comparative analysis through the medium of both the operational art and the campaign planning process.

The chapter also describes how we can reasonably infer deductions on the professional performance of Victorian commanders, primarily by knowing what was expected of them in their day, and understanding what they had already shown themselves to be capable of. The last part of the chapter addresses the close detail of Research Design and strives to reflect how the research was focussed on attempting to establish the prevailing operational realities of 1884-5 to an evidential standard.

¹ ADP *Operations*, Ch. 7, para. 0708, 7-4.



Map 4: Khartoum and the 'South Front' Defences

Note the marked difference between the usual line of the east bank of the White Nile and the seasonal high water mark just west of the city limits. By the time of the Mahdist assault on the night 25/26 January the western end of the rampart had been destroyed by the rise and fall of the river over the previous few months.
[Image Source: Sandes, *RE in Egypt and Sudan*.]

Chapter 3

METHODOLOGY

3.1 PURPOSE AND UTILITY OF THE RESEARCH

In 1893 Dublin-born artist George William Joy set out to capture a fleeting moment of realisation: a two-second pause amidst anarchy; the instant when it dawns on the animated men rushing up the palace stairs, just who is standing at the head of them. The end result of Joy's artistic endeavour, *The Death of General Gordon, Khartoum, 26 January 1885*,¹ was a striking piece of romantic art: it was also destined to become one of the great icons of the British Empire; emblematic, in many pre-war minds, of a great nation's divinely anointed mission to 'civilize' the wilder corners of the globe. Many important historical themes collided in those same two seconds; the slave trade in Eastern Africa; the rise of Islamic fundamentalism; the origins of the Anglo-Egyptian condominium over the Sudan; the continuance of the 'Veiled Protectorate' in Egypt; the story of the near-eastern British Empire to 1956; the politics of modern Sudan, north and south alike; the monstrous character assumed by King Leopold's private fiefdom in the Congo; the Second World War in Africa; the psyche of late-Victorian/Edwardian Britain; the life of Gladstone; the rise of Kitchener; the life of Wolseley and the fall of the Ring System; the history of the British Army and of the Royal Navy. There are other themes one could add to an already impressive list, but the point is well enough made without them.

The historic significance of its setting is clear, the consequences of its failure profound; but why is an analytical dissection of the Gordon Relief Expedition, as an operation of war, worthy of the endeavour? Two of three main reasons are grounded in the ethics of history, while the last enjoys more tangible pertinence in the context of military education. First, it cannot be acceptable to condone or connive in the perpetuation of false history; instead we are duty bound to probe suspected occurrences and, where they are confirmed to exist, to expose them. Expressed in the Rankean sense, the conventional understanding of the British failure on the Nile would appear not to encapsulate, 'what really happened'. The integrity of history, then, is the first offended ethic. The second offence is against justice, in the sense that the mature judgment of history should strive to lay bare the always unethical and sometimes morally repugnant practices of scapegoating and cover-up. If the received judgement of history can be thought of as a supreme-court, then this research must strive to determine whether or not justice has miscarried in the case of Sir Charles Wilson. If historical integrity and justice are by their very nature worthy of academic endeavour, what of the third and more practical reason?

For all the conceptual distractions arising from elementary 'asymmetric' threats, it remains the commonly received wisdom that the Western militaries have

¹ Leeds City Museum & Art Gallery.

now entered a new age of expeditionary warfare. If that is so, then the education of future practitioners of the art of war ought to reflect this: failed expeditions of the past thus assume new utility as the cautionary tales of today. Peeling back obfuscations surrounding the Nile Expedition, to expose any underlying errors in the application of the Operational Art, will convey the advantage of rendering the campaign a more accessible case-study for military colleges than it presently represents. The prevailing perception is that, whilst complex and interesting, the campaign ultimately amounted to a near-miss in time and space, an outcome in large part attributable to inescapable political fetters. If the failure was of a far greater magnitude than is realised, however, if the mission not only could but should have been accomplished, if commanders made fundamental errors of judgement, if the campaign plan was flawed from the outset, but might nonetheless have been corrected in the field, and if all these things have been obfuscated by means of cover-up and scapegoating, then we find ourselves in altogether different territory: a campaign formerly of only passing interest now has the potential to become a first-rate case-study and teaching tool across a number of different military dimensions. The research question has therefore been developed with one eye on rendering Wolseley's last field command more accessible; not least for those whose business it is to teach the principles of Campaign Design and Campaign Management. It might also serve well as a moral tale in the field of leadership training. It might be added that for all of the foregoing, the subject is important enough a passage of military history to serve as its own justification.

It is salient that contemporary British military doctrine emphasises the value of lessons learned, as one of the consequences of post-operational obfuscation, (typically a function of professional embarrassment), can be that potentially useful lessons are never aired. Conscious, perhaps not without due cause, that the Army of the early 21st century appeared to have developed a propensity to forgetfulness, the extant (2010) edition of ADP *Operations* emphasises that:

An Army that cannot learn lessons is destined to fail. A lesson is an experience, example or observation that imparts beneficial new knowledge or wisdom for the future. It is something that can be analysed to produce recommendations and actions and as such can be positive or negative. Feedback from activity is essential to ensure that lessons, some of which have been exposed at great cost, are not only identified but actually learned.

A subsequent sub-paragraph observes that learning lessons requires:

....a culture of humility and trust that encourages examination of what happened, what went right and what went wrong. Positive lessons can be drawn from both, so it is counter-productive to make lessons the subject of an inquisitorial and adversarial culture. The only lessons which are worth treating in this way are those which have been ignored.¹

¹ ADP *Operations*, Ch. 2, Para. 0249, 2-35.

3.2 ONTOLOGY AND EPISTEMOLOGY

3.2.1 Approach

Conventionally military history has been regarded by the academic mainstream as a domain of the specialist. For all that the appellation might sometimes be whispered disparagingly, there is nothing intrinsically objectionable in being regarded as somewhat apart from the rest of the herd. Academic segregation is not without its consequences however: Military history as an art form has been much inclined to forge its own trail, without too much regard for developments in mainstream History, and almost no regard for philosophical semantics. Little influenced by post-modernism, and overwhelmingly written by male, middle-aged English-speakers, military history has tended to the conservative and remained broadly content with the old modernist ways first espoused by Enlightenment scholars. Because it has also tended to be regarded by academic leftists as both an exercise in the glorification of war and a bedfellow of security studies, of which they also disapprove, there has been little concern in either camp over any parting of the ways. Thus the majority of military historians have remained contentedly modernist by ontological disposition and empiricist or objectivist in their epistemological approach. That is not to say that middle-ground scepticism does not also play an important role, if for no other reason than that interpretations of complex military operations tend not to agree on very much for very long. It is perhaps not too fanciful a generalisation to observe that ontology has conventionally been regarded by a majority of military historians as semantic and faddish: indeed there is some truth in the assertion that, as a branch of metaphysics originally and fundamentally concerned with 'being' or 'existence' in the specific context of the human condition, it has, somewhere along the road to the present day, undergone the indignity of hijacking.

Today, convention requires that anybody with academic pretensions of any kind acknowledge his or her ontological frailties in contemplating their subject matter. In the case of historians, ontology arises not in the metaphysical sense, but in the context of the prejudices and predispositions of the interlocutor *vis a vis* the commonly made assertion of objectivity. Well-developed battle lines have been drawn since the 1970s. In *Deconstructing History*, (London, 1997), Alun Munslow divides historians into deconstructionists, constructionists and reconstructionists, categorizations which strike me as being in some sense analogous to the political divisions of leftist, centrist and rightist. For its part, the deconstructionist camp advocates an assortment of intellectual positions across a spectrum of post-modernist scepticism. At the most extreme end of the spectrum post-modernist thinking can tend towards the condemnatory, by attacking the very notion of History and portraying historians as practitioners of nothing more than a literary form. In essence their ontologically based objections to the validity of epistemological empiricism centre on the premise that the past, because it is devoid of a tangible or palpable form, must be unknowable; that it can never, by definition, be comprehensively recapitulated. From this it follows that assertions of objectivity must always be spurious, since historians in *selecting* their sources and drawing inferences from them are making *interventions* in

the here and now. Thus modernist or empiricist historians must perforce derive only narrow, contrived, personalised, (thus inherently prejudiced), *versions* (in the plural) of a single, bygone, (hence unknowable), reality. Empiricist narrative, it is argued, will always be compromised by the predispositions of its originator and the arbitrary deployment of evidence consequent upon those predispositions.¹

On the other hand, the more conservative reconstructionist school will assert that the historical evidence will always speak for itself. It serves as the safety net, so to speak, beneath the high wire of truth and objectivity. Munslow asserts² that the origins of the constructionist approach lie in the philosophy of Immanuel Kant,³ and that it now constitutes the predominant school of thought. Constructionists occupy the middle ground by recognizing that the practice of history will always be (unavoidably) narrativist by nature, but that this does not of itself preclude the attainment of objectivity. The constructionist historian is likely to attempt to employ both theoretical concepts and methodical empiricism, in purportedly more compelling combination than purist empiricism alone.

If Munslow sees reconstructionists as a minority, my personal perception is that the balance is much more even inside the specialist field of military history. Having along my backtrail developed some modest subject matter expertise in the Anglo-Zulu War, I would cite, by way of example, occasionally furious debates about precisely who said what to whom and when, at the patently 'unknowable' Battle of Isandlwana (1879), an action survived by only a handful of competent witnesses, who must by definition have fled the field partway through the fight. My own published inferences on the history of that elusive battle were partially constructionist in origin, in that they drew on ground study, time and space analysis, burial mapping, various contemporaneous doctrinal premises and hypothesis to frame what I believed to be a broadly sustainable portrayal of the (ultimately unknowable) closing stages of the fight. At the same time, what I had perceived to be the domain of the knowable had been addressed by means of scrupulous empiricism. Having, somewhat inevitably, in 30 years as a regular soldier, been but indifferently schooled in philosophy, I interject my research on Isandlwana as constituting the key to the realisation that I should count myself a constructionist with a strong empiricist ethic (and perhaps even reconstructionist leanings!). It is in just such a 'broad church' epistemological spirit that the present project has been approached. I perceive the spread of the primary source coverage to be generally excellent, although as was alluded to in Chapter 2 much of it has remained untapped up to this point. There will be still more hidden in even darker recesses. For the present its spread is such that I have been convinced from the outset that it will be possible to arrive at a close and justifiable approximation to bygone reality.

This assertion usefully brings me off the epistemological fence. Because the research question determines that the essence of the research is in the nature of an impartial investigation, into an important military-historical episode of more than a

¹ Munslow, *Deconstructing History*, (London, 1997); *Routledge Companion to Historical Studies*, (Abingdon & New York, 2000).

² *Historical Studies*, 4, 157-8).

³ b. 1724, d. 1804.

century ago, it was to some extent epistemologically inevitable that it would best be tackled along empiricist lines and that it should aspire to objectivity. That the military-historical *concept* underpinning the written submission should be that of 'rationalism', a theme shortly to be addressed under its own heading, is much more a function of choice. In the spirit of moderate scepticism, there would always have to be a question-mark over the extent to which a Western European historian, living in the early 21st Century, (thus typically democratically minded, liberally inclined, perhaps of an agnostic or atheistic bent etc.), could ever vicariously project into the mind of Muḥammad Aḥmad ibn al-Saiyid 'Abd Allāh, who called himself the Mahdī, (therein hangs a tale), an ethnically Arab Sudanese holy man of Islamic fundamentalist bent, who lived under Egyptian colonial rule, in the late nineteenth century. In fact the issue almost immediately resolves itself, somewhat to the advantage of the deconstructionist camp it must be said, when in my own case I am constrained to recognize that even after many years of study, I remain unable to pronounce, with any degree of confidence or authority that is, whether Muḥammad Aḥmad suffered from a 'grandiose' delusional disorder, or instead should be thought of as a megalomaniacal charlatan. Perhaps a professional psychologist would be able to study the documentary record and hazard an authentic opinion, but as a military historian I find myself unqualified, hence justifiably disinclined, to pronounce on the matter. All I can reasonably say, without fear of contradiction that is, is that self-evidently he was not *the Mahdī*, (whose coming must by definition precede the Day of Judgment), but rather *a Mahdīst*; merely one of a long line of men who have either mischievously claimed to be the Mahdī, or who have been deluded enough to believe himself to be the Mahdī. At that point the diktats of good history oblige me to rein in. But even now it is possible to detect deconstructionist bloodhounds baying in the matter of language: is it really *mischievous* to brand oneself *the Mahdī*, if the compulsion to do so springs only from a sincere desire to see the people liberated? 'One man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter', they say: a contemporary witticism which amounts to no mean defence of the post-modernist position.

But this cheerful admission of an inability to pronounce in a matter so fundamental to the history of the *Mahdīya* may not be quite the clear-cut victory for post-modernism that it appears. Rather it could be a simple function of the quality of the evidence available to European historians unschooled in Arabic. The historians best qualified to pronounce on the psychological context of Muḥammad Aḥmad's challenge to the established order are most likely to be found at the University of Khartoum. The best evidence from which to infer an authoritative conclusion is likely to be in the Sudanese national archive, rather than in England, where the historical record generally pre-supposes megalomania. It follows that the optimised interpretation of Anglo-Mahdīst conflict would be a joint endeavour between British and Sudanese scholars. That said, the absence of such a history is merely a function of practicality, geography and expense and cannot be taken to imply that both British and Sudanese historians should refrain from addressing the *Mahdīya*, without the active participation of confederates of the countervailing persuasion. In the present instance, for example, the reasonable assumption that the British failure to reach Khartoum was in large part

self-inflicted, that is to say that its origins are likely to lie in defective planning and decision-making, will allow the validity of a substantially Anglocentric study.

In constructing a defence of an empiricist historical investigation, it is in no sense difficult to draw on any number of analogies from perfectly valid types of investigation. Let us turn to the domain of criminal investigation for an illustrative metaphor. In an ontologically post-modernist sense, an act of murder would cease to 'exist' with the last blow of the axe or the administration of the final draft of poison. It follows that the criminal act *per se* will not be present when Scotland Yard attends the scene. What remains, that which the Scotland Yard man seeks, is evidence pertaining to a deed which now abides only in the past. Thus the post-modernist thinker must surely have it that the detective's quest is all but futile. In reality, of course, the absence of the deed, consequent upon its cessation as tangible or palpable reality, does not preclude the detective establishing a very close approximation to the shape and form it had once assumed. Some doubt might be attached to such matters as precisely which door the perpetrator might have used to gain entry, but this will not of itself preclude prosecuting a case to a satisfactory outcome. Why, then, can scrupulous empiricism not arrive at a similarly close approximation of a bygone reality and, by extension, a broadly satisfactory outcome?

Today few serious historians would argue that the post-modernist challenge is entirely devoid of validity (albeit there are those who now talk, not without good reason, of a 'post-post-modernist' age). There have always been, and always will be, slapdash historians, partisan historians, propagandists and charlatans, not to mention perfectly well intentioned and competent historians who simply missed the vital evidence. At the same time, the post-modernist objection can hardly justify wholesale dismissal of the modernist school, not least because History must always be an imperfect art and no avowedly 'better' philosophical approach has ever asserted itself so forcefully as to gain near universal acceptance. It seems to me that there is a three-way relationship between the validity of the post-modernist challenge, the span or complexity of the subject under contemplation, and the intervening passage of time (which influences the availability of evidence, be it positively or negatively). Thus, where there will always be room to question how close to past 'reality' a history of the Carthaginian Empire is likely to come, there is rather less room to doubt, say, a competently executed history of the four months spanned by the Transvaal Rebellion of December 1880-March 1881.

In terms of its epistemology, this research relies on my personal perception that the legitimacy of empiricist narrative and inference is proportional, in the first instance, to the quality of the intellectual effort invested in it by its originator, (an essentially reconstructionist contention), and in the second, by the length and depth of the originator's 'immersion' in the subject, both in terms of the immediate theme or issue in hand, and the broader epoch or theme in which it is set (an essentially constructionist contention). To put it another way, if post-modernist cynicism relies on such broad-brush assumptions as the inevitability of superficiality, it *must*, (or at least *should*, if nothing else as a function of good manners), shrink somewhat in the face of palpable subject matter expertise. Illustratively, it is not a valid position to contend that narrativist inferences drawn on the subject of Marlborough's campaigns by a

random cohort of undergraduate learners should enjoy equal standing with those, say, of the late Dr David Chandler.¹ It is also the case that the narrower the focus, the easier it will be for empiricism to enjoy validity. In the present instance, it might reasonably be observed that the history of British military operations in the Bayūda Desert is hardly Byzantine in breadth. The key question is how best to derive, in our own time, a *bona fide* comprehension of a small army of high-Victorian 'Englishmen', marching through nineteenth century Sudan on camels, or rowing up the Nile in whalers. Of course the diktats of post-modernism would have it that neither the people nor the setting still survives. It is a contention which, in a literal sense at least, must assuredly be true; but how far is it true to suggest that the people and the setting have been expunged, in their every dimension, from both human cognition and the physical domain?

It is difficult, I would contend, to stand in the stifling heat of a deserted swathe of the Bayūda Desert, looking at graves which might have been dug a week ago, with scores of Martini-Henry cartridge cases at one's feet, and copies of the most important primary sources tucked into one's haversack, and still acknowledge the unquestioned validity of the post-modernist challenge. At such moments the Battle of Abu Klea is not present as a palpable reality: but in whatever ontological terms one cares to think, its shadow, its ghost, its essence, *will*, (or at least *should*), be shimmering in the heat haze, wherever a competent military historian gazes across the landscape. I should add that I use 'competent' in a very specific sense; mere passing familiarity with the battle will not suffice to conjure it; what is required is an intense form of immersion in the subject. At the same time, it must be owned that while it would appear to be a relatively straightforward proposition for someone who happens to be a veteran of 30 years' service in the British Army and a lifelong student of the small wars of empire, to stand at Abu Klea and project vicariously into the mind of a long dead British officer, it is not at all the same thing to try and imagine the battle from the perspective of the Ja'līyīn Arabs present that day.

While contemplation of British participant accounts and maps will allow us to infer or deduce what the Mahdīsts did, 'westerners' can only make intelligent guesses, (primarily of a military tactical character), as to *why* they did what they *would appear* to have done. At the same time, we cannot begin to infer quite what was running through their minds in the heat of the shock action charge, in large part because so few nineteenth century Sudanese were literate. In the wholesale absence of primary source evidence from the Mahdīst side, our inferences might tend towards little more than intelligent guesswork. On the other hand, cultural empathy, such as might be derived from long service in the British infantry, combined with the availability of a wide range of primary source evidence, might well permit us to infer a reasonably empathetic understanding of what it must have felt like to be a British 'Tommy' on the receiving end of the Mahdīst charge. At Abu Kru, for example, we know that the climactic charge, coming as it did after a protracted period of harassment by small arms fire, actually triggered a sensation of relief: somewhat improbably, the British greeted the onslaught with a cheer. A historian, of any persuasion one would care to

¹ See Chandler, *Marlborough as Military Commander*, (London, 1973); *The Art of Warfare in the Age of Marlborough*, (London, 1976).

name, could not begin to guess at that; as an element of the psychological 'reality' of the Abu Kru experience, it can only be detected through the scrupulous application of empiricism.

3.2.2 Immersion

These brief vignettes of fieldwork at Abu Klea and Abu Kru return me to my contention that there is a relationship between the legitimacy or accuracy of empiricist narrative and the degree to which its originator is immersed in the subject. The post-modernist challenge, devised let us not forget by philosophers, is in large part predicated on stereotyped visions of rigidly schooled empiricists sifting through archives in search of what they consider to be compelling documentary evidence (and only that). The epistemological approach underpinning this thesis, however, is not derived merely from the stereotype of referential respect for documentary evidence, (some proportion of which will always be mistaken, jaundiced or outright nonsense), but also from a variety of other complementary tools, techniques and experiences, which taken together contribute to broader, deeper immersion.

The fieldwork conducted in support of this project,¹ some phases of which may well be without precedent,² provides a ready example. It is not possible to digress into how fieldwork conducted on a battlefield can contribute to our comprehension of historic 'reality', as this would require an essay length treatment in its own right. For the present, it will suffice to say that comprehension of such things as environmental factors, inter-visibility, manoeuvre and the precise meaning of primary source evidence will typically be greatly enhanced. A second good example of a method used in pursuit of immersion is field-firing the Martin-Henry rifle, using vintage rounds of ammunition, an exercise addressed at Appendix C in the specific context of the jamming controversy which followed Abu Klea. There are other examples, some of which we will come to later, but essentially the ontology is philosophically constructionist and the epistemology empiricist and objectivist. In other words, my approach has been to labour hard to touch a past reality I always believed I would be able to discern, but at the same time to recognize that not all my fellow travellers in military history will necessarily experience the same mirages, (nor I theirs for that matter).

3.2.3 Objectivity and the Mitigation of Cognitive Bias

If we are to gauge the performance of long dead military commanders, not least in an adversarial context, Wolseley v Wilson as it were, the maintenance of objectivity becomes a matter of the first importance, notwithstanding any post-modernist cynicism to the effect that it is but a chimera. Unhelpfully, at least in terms of the empiricist cause, psychologists identify more than a hundred types of cognitive bias, phenomena which are unified, only by definition, as acts which are not only automatic,

¹ See Appendix B.

² For example I know of no published photography of certain battlefields, and other locations of interest, save my own.

but which also afflict us unconsciously. It follows that they are extremely difficult to counteract. One good example of the genre, presenting an obvious menace to the historian's objectivity, is designated 'Confirmation Bias', which is to say the inclination to seek (and deploy) data which supports one's preconceptions, and at the same time discount information which runs contrary to them.

Logically, given its characteristics, mere awareness of cognitive bias will not suffice as a means of mitigating it. Unfortunately, mitigation of bias is not an academic field which has received a great deal of attention, so that presently there are no demonstrably effective or well-proven techniques to draw upon. In the present instance, even the title page of this thesis could be thought linguistically dubious, with its references to 'scapegoating' and 'abrogation of command responsibility'. But with all due regard to philosophers and psychologists alike, historians have to start somewhere, or there can never be history-related hypotheses worthy of testing. For the purpose of this research, then, and regardless of the psychologists' assertion that mere awareness is no defence, I have endeavoured to remain vigilant in respect of confirmation bias, often going back over a particular array of evidence many times. Thus no inferences have been hastily arrived at, (which is not to say that they are all necessarily infallible), nor do I believe that any 'inconvenient' evidence has been passed over or disregarded. Instead all areas of controversy have been carefully contemplated before any attempt has been made to move towards a deduction or a conclusion. Indeed the complexity of some of the issues actively prevented any undue nimbleness of the intellect. I would also be tolerably certain that what I have not done is *fail to mention* any evidence which runs contrary to my hypothesis. That is not to assert as fact that nothing has been missed, but merely to assert that an honest attempt to miss nothing has been made.

Continuing with the theme of cognitive bias, this time specifically in respect of historical personalities, it will not be out of place to reflect on the so-called 'Halo Effect', a category of bias first identified and described in 1920, by the psychologist Edward Thorndike, appropriately enough, on the basis of experimentation conducted in a British Army setting. The Halo Effect is a cognitive bias which can lead one to assume, in the context of a favourable 'first impression', (potentially on the basis of something as superficial as 'looks' or smartness), that the subject at issue is all good; for example, that somebody, [taking as read an attractive appearance, amiability etc.], who is clearly a good oral communicator, must perforce also be good on paper. The 'horns' effect is not unnaturally the corollary to the halo, which is to say that a subject who gets off on the wrong foot, might subsequently have a variety of other negative characteristics or failings unwarrantably attributed to them. It is to be doubted whether Horn and Halo can ever exert quite the same potent influence over one's perceptions of the long dead. Even so, in the present instance it will plainly be necessary that neither Horn nor Halo are permitted to exert undue influence over inferences drawn in respect of Wolseley, Wilson or any other witness.

We have seen that, theoretically at least, mere awareness of cognitive bias is no defence. In practice, however, I suspect that historians can, through studious application, devise and self-impose a number of tolerably effective checks and balances pertinent to their field. Thus, Wolseley, whose overweening vanity certainly

created a bad impression when first I read his Nile journal, (just as it had on Preston, who transcribed and prefaced it),¹ cannot be assumed to be a 'bad hat' in any other dimension one might care to name. Vanity, for example, does not necessarily imply any propensity to lie: (Horn Effect). Similarly, just because Wolseley's (metaphorical) 'Decision A' would appear questionable, that suspicion cannot, of itself, justify making a special effort to find fault with his 'Decision B': (Confirmation Bias). Rather each individual decision in a sequence of decisions must be contemplated in splendid isolation, at least in terms of its intrinsic merit, if not in terms of its operational context. Likewise, if Sir Charles Wilson would appear at first glance to have done well at Abu Kru, (a battle he won after all), this should in no way predispose us to assume that his every action in respect of the steamer dash was similarly sound: (Halo Effect). Except in so far as they are operationally linked events from the same campaign, they are not *per se* intrinsically interconnected issues. Summation 1 strives to encapsulate the pursuit of objectivity and to portray the spirit of my self-imposed checks and balances.

3.3 METHODOLOGY AND THE RATIONALIST DIMENSION

There is a marked present day tendency to corrupt the word 'methodology' to serve as a pretentious substitute for 'method', but a methodology is a strategy, not a list of techniques or tools. In the present instance, the governing strategic approach is encapsulated by the schematic representation of the research paradigm at Schematic 1, while the essence of the associated ontological and epistemological aspects of the methodology is to be found in tabulated form at Summation 2. Also essential to the strategy is 'rationalist' analysis predicated on commonly accepted tenets of the military art. But one of the fundamental problems of military history is, just who is to say what those tenets are? And who should stipulate how they should be applied to historical episodes? This is an interesting and important issue well worthy of further contemplation.

As a function of choice, distinctly separate from the inevitable orthodoxy of its epistemological approach, this thesis draws upon what Stephen Morillo² and Michael F. Pavkovic have characterised as the 'universalist' or 'rationalist' approach to military history. This assumes that rationalist analysis based on universal military principles will, 'produce similar results in similar situations through time and across cultures.'³ Morillo and Pavkovic assert that this has conventionally been the meat and drink of 'art of war' studies. I tend to take the view that while there might well be some debateable legitimacy in the notion of universal military principles, it is a far from cut and dried issue: it follows that to plunge into deep history on the basis that there are, or must be, such principles, and that one's audience is certain to agree upon them, will generally be ill-advised. In part these reservations are based on personal experience of

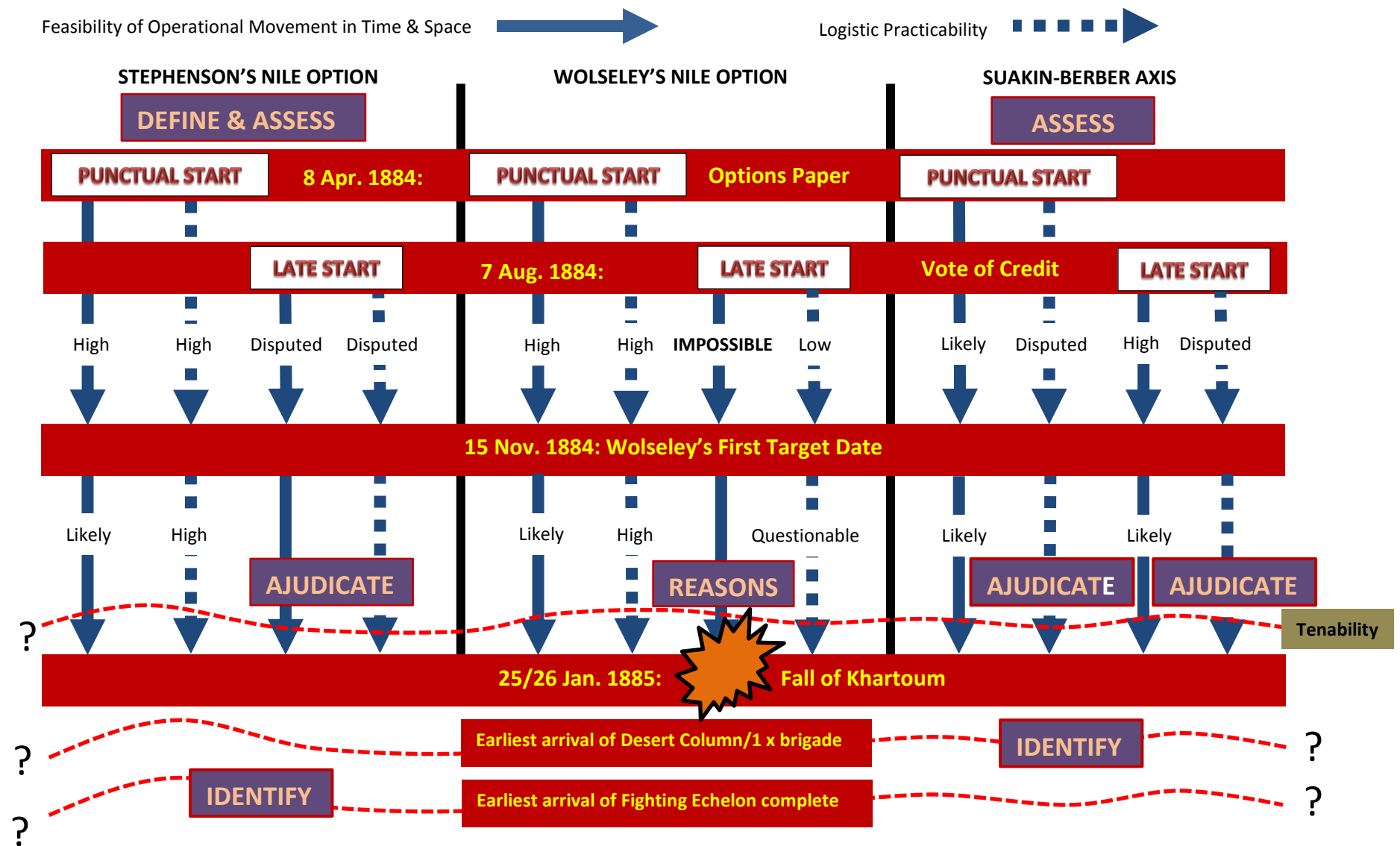
¹ See by way of confirmation, Prof. Ian F. W. Beckett, *Wolseley and Ashanti: The Asante War Journal and Correspondence of Major General Sir Garnet Wolseley 1873-4*, (Army Records Society, Stroud, 2009), 21: 'Preston, however, was an unsympathetic editor, who clearly intensely disliked Wolseley.'

² *What is Military History*, (2nd Edn., Cambridge & Malden MA, 2013).

³ Ibid, 49-50.

What are the threats to Objectivity?	How can they be mitigated?
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Tenets of the post-modernist challenge: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. The act of intervention. b. Arbitrary selection of sources. c. Interpretation of sources. d. Intangibility of past reality. 2. Own cognitive biases including and especially: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. 'Horn' and 'Halo' effects. b. Confirmation Bias. 3. Cultural Barriers: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Mahdism and Islamic Theology b. Fundamentalism. c. Victorian Values. d. Military Modus Operandi. 4. Military Rationalism. 5. Anglo-centrism. 6. Deficiencies of Primary Source Material: <p>Falsehoods; prejudice, bias; enmities; gaps; hyperbole; inaccuracies; misapprehensions.</p> 	<p>An incontestable given.</p> <p>Palpable thoroughness in identifying and collating testimony.</p> <p>Integrity of analysis: as if conducting a publicly accountable enquiry.</p> <p>Confront as a question of degree. Seek to demonstrate that it is not an absolute.</p> <p>Theoretically impossible: (cognitive bias is by definition automatic and unconscious).</p> <p>Avoid turning casual perceptions into ostensibly legitimate assumptions.</p> <p>Strive for open-mindedness and even-handedness. Work through issues several times.</p> <p>Awareness through research. Travel in Sudan. Engage with indigenous population.</p> <p>Contemporary resonance. Consider psychology of fundamentalism.</p> <p>Some continuity in 'traditional' values.</p> <p>Considerable resonance in the regular army ethic.</p> <p>Contemporaneous manuals, regulations and articulations of 'Military Thought'.</p> <p>Eschew purist approach. Develop paradigm for 'tempered' rationalism.</p> <p>Recognize, embrace: ultimately the research question allows an Anglocentric approach.</p> <p>Illiteracy rate in 19th Century Sudan is an insurmountable factor.</p> <p>Require collateral. Assess stance and motive. Identify self-interest. Apply grading and weighting techniques.</p>

Table 1: Summation of Threats to Objectivity



RESEARCH DESIGN: NOTES TO SCHEMATIC 1

Almost by definition the primary planning factor in any 'relief expedition' will be the reconciliation of 'time and space', the military term for the relationship between likely or actual progress across distance, and the time available for the accomplishment of the task. Arrayed either side of Wolseley's Nile option are the operational level alternatives, on the left Sir Frederick Stephenson's version of a Nile Campaign, and on the right the Suakin-Berber axis. In order to achieve its goals, this research would first have to establish what caused Khartoum to fall, and why it fell when it did, as these findings would serve to delineate the true parameters of time and space. Next, if the mere return to Khartoum of two steamers, with precisely 28 British servicemen aboard, could not be deemed to represent the relief of the city, it would be necessary to establish where, in terms of 'space', the missing 99.72% of Wolseley's fighting echelon was located, in juxtaposition to a window in time which snapped shut in the early hours of 26 January 1885. This would substitute a more objective understanding of time and space for the 'two days' myth. If the city had been at the end of its tether for some time, but had not been stormed when it might have been, (as indicated by the dotted red 'tenability' line), then there is an additional quantity of days or weeks to add into the equation, in order to arrive at the true extent of the British failure. Depending on what orders had been given to tactical level commanders, up to the point at which the defence of Khartoum transitioned to untenable, this calculation might of itself refute the notion that the reasons for failure are to be found at the tactical level. Even if this were so, because not all the accusations levelled at Wilson were related to time and space considerations, it would still be necessary for the thesis to analyse the tactical level of operations in order that more peripheral accusations also be addressed. If time and space analysis revealed a substantial gap between 26 January and the earliest date by which Wolseley could have brought his fighting echelon to bear, (the bottom-most dotted red line), then it would follow that the Nile plan was either unworkable from the outset, or that it derailed in the execution. If the former, it would be necessary to examine the military viability of the much shorter, but not necessarily practicable, Suakin-Berber axis. If the latter, it would be necessary to show how the campaign plan could have been prevented from going awry – the self-explanatory Campaign Review and Campaign Management processes of today. Taken together, this implied a necessity to focus on judgement and decision-making. Even the most cursory familiarity with the subject, would always tend to render remarkable Wolseley's decision to advance in rowing boats around the 400-mile arc of the 'great bend'. How could it be that 'our only general' took a decision which seemed to bespeak so fundamental a failure to master time and space? It was this line of enquiry which was to throw up the unexpected – the existence of a secret phase of operations, predicated on an unendorsed Campaign Objective known only to Wolseley.

What do I need to know?	How will it be possible for me to know it?
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Context. 2. Ground. 3. Enemy Factors. 4. Time & Space. 5. Commander's Intent. 6. The Plan. 7. Key Occurrences. 8. Outcomes. 	<p>Collate from Whitehall and Cairo govt. communications.</p> <p>Study mapping, environmental change/stability, primary source evidence. Conduct fieldwork.</p> <p>Collate from intelligence reports, prisoner interrogation, intelligence officers diaries and memoirs.</p> <p>Analyse mapping and travelogues. Conduct fieldwork. Gather local knowledge.</p> <p>Sift commanders' journals, correspondence and written orders. Identify strategic direction.</p> <p>Sift Official History, participant accounts, written orders, war-diary.</p> <p>Extract from Official History and generalist history. Utilise participant accounts to verify and overlay with detail.</p> <p>Freeze the frame at nightfall 25 Jan. 1885 and establish the precise operational situation.</p>
What do I need to infer?	How am I going to infer it
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Where obfuscations & misrepresentations have occurred. 2. Variables in Time & Space. 3. Viability of Alternatives. 4. Decision Points. 5. Changes to Intent. 6. Implications of Key Occurrences. 7. Personal Relationships. 8. Personality: character, bias, ability etc. 9. Factors contributing to Mission Failure. 10. Ideals for Planning & Management of campaigns. 	<p>Identify indicators such as anomalies, inconsistency, stridency, jaundice, vagueness, sins of omission, self-aggrandizement, hyperbole, irrelevance.</p> <p>Consider seasonal factors, means of travel, deteriorations or improvements in military capacity or environmental conditions.</p> <p>Assess Time & Space. Consider logistic practicability & prevailing environmental and enemy factors.</p> <p>Identify by means of working backwards in Time & Space from 25 Jan. 1885.</p> <p>Trace through commanders' journals and correspondence.</p> <p>Cross reference participant accounts with dates.</p> <p>Collate from accounts, memoirs and correspondence. Consider effect of mutual campaign service.</p> <p>Contemplate: service record; memoirs and autobiographies; contemporaneous witnesses.</p> <p>Collate from participants opinions, mil/govt confidential communications, official despatches.</p> <p>Derive from precedent and contemporary military doctrine.</p>

Table 2: Summation of Ontology and Epistemology

having too often seen syndicates of modern military learners set about commanders of a bygone age, on the basis of contemporary military precepts with which the historical personalities at issue would not have been at all familiar. There are three unsatisfactory aspects to such proceedings. First, it is fundamentally unfair to the subject who, for better or worse, has a legitimate place in history, generally for a *bona fide* set of reasons. Second, it is an insufferably smug practice, which does not bespeak any great intellect on the part of those who resort to it. Third, there is a significant risk of a military case-study being abused so extensively that learners will derive only false lessons from it.

One needs only to reflect on the 'lions led by donkeys' interpretation of First World War generalship to immediately recognise the perils of the universalist approach. Doubtless the precept will rear its head again over the course of the forthcoming centenary commemoration, though this time it is to be hoped that there will be sufficient constructionist military historians at hand to relate that the attritionalist warfare of 1914-18 was a function of the temporary superiority of the defensive over the offensive, rather than any imagined intellectual deficiencies of the officer corps. In fact we will shortly encounter some of the eponymous donkeys of 1914-18 playing the role of very brave young lions in nineteenth century Sudan. Without belabouring the point, the potential pitfalls of universalist interpretation are apparent. For example, to contend that Saladin should have pursued a particular course of action, because that is what rational application of the operational art would drive us to do today, is to ignore the passage of nigh on a millennium and any possibility that the tenets of Islam might have exerted some form of apparent contrariety over its adherents. Similarly to flay Custer for dividing his regiment at Little Big Horn is to ignore the standard Plains Indian tactic (up to 25 June 1876) of rapid and omnidirectional dispersal when attacked. Knowing, recognizing and having the capacity to reconcile such facts is to be able to adapt or temper the rationalist approach. Indeed without what I would characterise as 'intelligent tempering', which will most commonly be a function of a sophisticated understanding of both the era and the antagonists, I would incline to the view that the exercise of purist rationalism must always tend to venture perilously close to charlatanism.

As suggested by the title page, the central focus of the thesis is to ascertain whether or not a successful military cover-up has survived down the generations, and in so doing shrouded a *bona fide* reason, or set of reasons, why the Khartoum Campaign foundered as badly as it did. Such a theme implies the necessity to judge the performance in the field of military commanders from a bygone age and tends to point in the direction of rationalist analysis. We have established, for the reasons articulated above, that this can be difficult territory: rushing in to opine, the stock in trade of the 'armchair general', will not suffice. If opining is substantially pointless, then arguing a fully contextualised case to an evidential standard has infinitely greater merit. It is to this much more testing proposition that this research aspires.

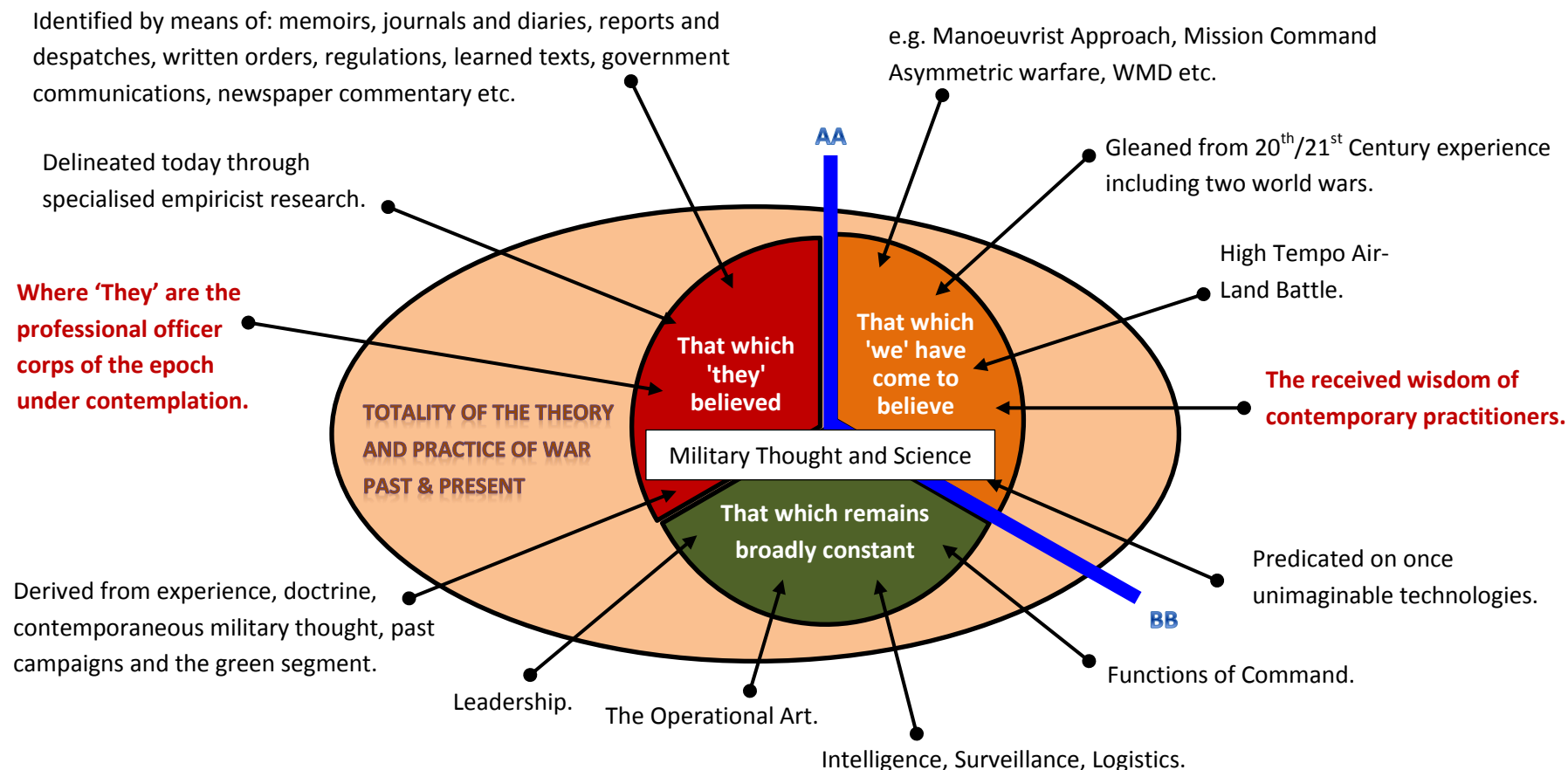
While it is allowable for modern militaries to examine historical campaigns in terms of contemporary doctrine and military thought, indeed, highly desirable that they should do so where there is a high order of resonance between the case study at issue and the battlefield of today, I have proposed that where no such resonance

exists, (a line I would be inclined to draw at 1939), it will generally constitute an act of charlatanism to roast historical figures for not doing in their day what we might conclude would certainly be done today. Of course, that is no way to suggest that modern militaries should *not* study campaigns pre-dating what I shall term 'the age of resonance', but rather to advance the premise that such study should always incorporate reflections on the contemporaneous state of the military art as it was then understood. There will, though, always be one universal exception; a domain where modern doctrine and military thought *will*, or more properly *should*, be universally applicable, and that is where study is focussed on the Operational Art – the business of planning and executing campaigns – the domain in which the eternal precepts of generalship and the art of war actually abide. If modern doctrine designed to reflect the Operational Art seems not to work that well when discussing Marlborough, Bonaparte or Rommel, the chances are that the doctrine is either poorly articulated (commonplace), has missed the point (not infrequent), or incorporates tenuous new reflections which simply do not hold water (something which happens more often than most armies would care to recognise).

These reflections, coupled with an anxiety that what I was proposing to set about be demonstrably 'fair' to the historical figures concerned, led me to devise a paradigm of 'tempered military rationalism', (portrayed at Schematic 2). While it has provided a useful conceptual handrail in the specific context of this research, it might also have wider utility, for example in devising 'war studies' programmes in war colleges and other such establishments. In essence the guiding principle applied throughout the thesis, to the process of military analysis, has been to pursue the rationalist approach only so far as is reasonably sustainable, through demonstrable commonality of approach 'then and now'. Subsequent sections will explain how an understanding of what might reasonably have been expected of officers of the high-Victorian Army was arrived at. In the meantime, there is merit in demonstrating that while the chronological and cultural leap from the British Army of the high-Victorian age to British military practice today is significant, it is by no means unbridgeable. Indeed, experience of the developing world has led me to conclude that the actuality of the cultural leap is not as wide as the chronological leap might suggest. In other words, 1884 was not as long ago as the first world is inclined to think. By way of illustration, a modern-day battalion commander rostered for duty in Southern Afghanistan could undertake far less profitable background reading than would be occasioned by skimming through Colonel C. E. Calwell's *Small Wars: Their Principles and Practice*, (HMSO, London, 1906 edition). He might, for example, usefully ponder what Callwell terms 'desultory operations':

Invertebrate, undecided leadership of the regular troops induces desultory operations, and guerrilla warfare is merely the most aggravated form of desultory operations. Marches¹ with no particular object in view or marches with no object apparent to the enemy, advances followed by retirements,

¹ The astute modern reader would contentedly substitute the word 'patrols' for 'marches'.



Where there is resonance between the red and amber segments, a universalist approach will be allowable and, certainly for war colleges, even desirable. One of the principal perils of rationalism, however, is drawing upon the amber segment for comparators when contemplating commanders whose world was at a significant chronological, technical, conceptual/doctrinal or experiential remove. Such practice will usually be of questionable historical legitimacy and doubtful utility; in terms of military education it can even be counterproductive, due to a concomitantly high risk of learners deriving false lessons. Where there is no resonance between red and amber, comparators and other methodological tools are best drawn from the domains to the left of the line AA-BB. The red segment will always be the source of essential context, from which it follows that it must always be well understood. Precedent can be drawn from red or green. The operational art, (the business of campaigning), and the functions of command will commonly be amongst the most legitimate and useful tools/methods of rationalist analysis.

Schematic 2: Paradigm of Tempered Military Rationalism

*attacks on hostile positions and the abandonment of the ground after it has been won – it is operations such as these which raise the spirits of the hostile forces and which may lead to a prolonged, costly and ineffective campaign, disastrous to the health of the troops and damaging to the prestige of the civilised power which has put them in the field. Every undertaking should have a definite and distinct purpose and once entered upon should be carried out to the end unless some insuperable objection unexpectedly arises. The enemy must be forced to understand that business is meant and that the regular army means to accomplish whatever enterprise it engages in. Half measures are fatal.*¹

Thus, in certain parts of the world, and in certain types of operations, the ‘age of resonance’ can be something of a moveable feast.

3.4 METHOD, TOOLS AND BENCHMARKS

3.4.1 The Principle of Command Responsibility

As the Research Question embraces the principle of ‘Command Responsibility’ it will be necessary briefly to reprise it and establish its validity in a Victorian context. Wolseley’s writing, (in this instance a passage from 1871, which in effect heralds the inauguration of the ‘Ring’ system), demonstrates his awareness of the heavy weight of responsibility carried by a general officer commanding in the field.

*The greatest care should be exercised in the selection of staff officers. The principal ones should be chosen by the General commanding an army in the field. If he is to be held responsible for its safety and success, it is not fair to force him to use confidential agents selected by others, and of whose ability he may, perhaps, have no opinion. If he is fit to command he is qualified to make a good choice, and if not, it is criminal to leave him in command for an hour.*²

Current British doctrine on the nature of command is to be found in Chapter 6 of ADP *Operations*, where the following key observations occur:

Command is the authority vested in an individual for the direction, coordination and control of military forces. It has a legal and constitutional status, codified for the Army in Queen’s Regulations, and is vested in a commander by a high authority that gives him direction and assigns forces to accomplish the mission. The exercise of command is the process by which a commander makes decisions, impresses his will on and transmits his intention to his subordinates. It entails authority, responsibility and accountability. A commander needs to have all three in balance...Responsibility is defined as professional obligation held by someone who ultimately takes credit for success and the blame for

¹ Calwell, *Small Wars*, 100-101.

² Wolseley, *Soldier’s Pocket-Book*, 62.

failure. Commanders should be clear that whilst they may delegate their authority, they should be careful how they delegate responsibility, if at all....Accountability involves a liability and an obligation to answer to a superior for the improper use of authority and resources. It includes the duty to act and execute missions in line with direction.

Many of the points made in this extract will have great resonance in the course of the thesis. In keeping with a philosophy of tempered rationalism, it articulates nothing which Victorian officers would have struggled to accept as valid in their own day.

We have already noted in passing the importance of ‘lessons learned’. In that context it is noteworthy that *ADP Operations* also observes, ‘A commander’s responsibility to his force extends beyond the operation, especially in recording the lessons identified, and contributing to the process by which those lessons are learned....A commander’s responsibility for lessons does not end until he is satisfied that they have been identified, communicated effectively and, within reason, properly exploited.’¹ From his point on, the precept of command responsibility, in all its dimensions, is taken as read and will not be laboured in the narrativist section of the thesis or its conclusions.

3.4.2 Tenets of the Operational Art

In terms of military theory and practice the present project always seemed destined to venture most frequently and pertinently into the arts of command and campaigning, fields which can be considered to have remained broadly constant since Bonaparte’s day. If quantifiable measurement of such ethereal precepts as command would not always be sustainable, it would be necessary to adopt some kind of tenable ‘yardstick’, or perhaps yardsticks in the plural, against which the ‘decision-making, leadership and control’² of principal role-players, (primarily Lord Wolseley, Sir Frederick Stephenson, Sir Herbert Stewart and Sir Charles Wilson), if they could not be measured, could at least be judged in a tolerably objective fashion. A ready recourse in achieving such a goal would be to the tenets of the Operational Art which, I have suggested, need to be defined at the outset and not merely contrived *en passant*, according to the convenience or whim of the individual historian. In contemplating what the best method of achieving this would be, it appeared that the doctrine of campaign planning was likely to be well suited to the purpose. Even so, there would remain the manifest difficulty that what is doctrine now might not have been doctrine, even under the loosest definition of the word, when the Duke of Cambridge held the reins at Horse Guards, an eventuality which would run counter to the guiding paradigm. Potentially problematically, there has long been a mantra to the effect that the British Army has never had much fondness for doctrine, and always tends to rub along best when its operational approach is made up on the hoof, an attribute sometimes more flatteringly characterised as ‘adaptability’.

¹ *ADP Operations*, Ch. 7, para. 0711, 7-5.

² Characterised in British doctrine as the three ‘classic’ constituents of command.

3.4.3 Utility of Current British Doctrine

While modern doctrine embraces ostensibly sophisticated tools and processes for campaign planning, our primary area of interest, it was not ever thus. It does not follow that campaigns must necessarily have been poorly planned before 'process' assumed its more formalised modern guise. One need look no further than the extraordinary achievements of Marlborough and Wellington to know that they can hardly have been making it up as they went along. Indeed the reality is that they planned and executed campaigns of far greater sophistication than anything the Army has been called upon to attempt since 1945.

Before making recourse to any of the elements of current British doctrine as comparators, benchmarks or yardsticks, it will be useful to establish what doctrine is and what it is *for*. Attempting to identify a current, internationally recognised definition would seem on the face of it to be a worthwhile exercise, but, as Dr Paul Latawski has demonstrated,¹ this is a far from straightforward undertaking. Rather than derail into a discussion of what successive desk officers in UK, USA or NATO have concluded, we can safely fall back on *The Oxford Companion to Military History*, where doctrine is defined by Professor Daniel Moran.

*An approved set of principles and methods intended to provide large military organizations with a common outlook and a uniform basis for action. Military doctrine makes explicit ideas or assumptions that in earlier times were conveyed by cultural means, or directly by commanders to their subordinates...The value of doctrine at what is now called the operational level of war is more complex. Doctrine achieves its clarifying effects by a judicious narrowing of the intellectual horizons of those making decisions....*²

The final sentence is useful, implying as it does that intelligence, knowledge, logic, powers of reasoning, common sense and experience – timeless qualities which any competent military commander must assuredly possess – can combine to arrive at sound judgements, without procedural doctrine having been indispensable to the process:³ after all its purpose is merely to aid clarity by narrowing the intellectual horizons – achieving focus in other words – an effect which can and should be independently arrived at in the everyday human process of resolving complex problems. Even cursory familiarity with Wolseley's methods will demonstrate that he possessed a rational, logical and well-ordered mind and liked to surround himself with

¹ See Dr Paul Latawski, *The Inherent Tensions in Military Doctrine*, Sandhurst Occasional Paper No. 5, (RMAS, Camberley, 2011), 4-11.

² Prof. Richard Holmes CBE, TD, (Gen. Ed.), *The Oxford Companion to Military History*, (Oxford University Press, 2001); for Moran on Doctrine see pp. 262-3.

³ Current British doctrine concurs: 'UK operational level planning is command-led and dynamic. While staff may assist a JFC, ultimately it is *his* plan and he drives its development. The essence of this relationship is based on an acknowledgement that planning is a mental activity, *aided but not driven by process*. Although each individual campaign has a unique context....all campaigns share a common purpose: to translate strategic intent into tactical activity.' JDP 5-00, *Campaign Planning*, Ch. 2, para. 217, 2-8.

staff officers of like bent. In other words, the Wolseley Ring relied on timeless attributes which will be easy enough to recognize, even from a range of twelve decades.

Both the 1994 and 2010 editions of the key doctrinal publication ADP *Operations* incorporate essays by leading military historians of the day, the musings of Dr Brian Holden-Reid¹ and Professor Gary Sheffield² respectively, in which the authors seek to trace the development of British doctrinal thought. Holden-Reid asserts that the great bulk of contemporary British doctrine has been derived from the experience of the two World Wars, but did not become institutionalised until the Army's doctrine boom, so to speak, of the 1980s. Sheffield, on the other hand, argues that by the 1950s the Army had coalesced into two *de facto* schools of doctrinal thought based around the contrasting command styles of Montgomery and Slim. The former Sheffield tends to characterize as centralised and attritionalist,³ the latter decentralised and manoeuvrist. The contention of both essays, by inference, is that there was no doctrine in the Victorian army. We will consider whether that constitutes a wholly valid interpretation shortly.

In the meantime it would certainly be invidious to gauge the performance of Victorian officers against every precept of the predominant 'manoeuvrist' approach of our own epoch, if nothing else because it owes so much as a philosophy of war to high tempo mechanized operations and the air dimension. On the other hand, the distinction drawn by Sheffield between centralised and decentralised command styles is as old as warfare itself. From this we might reasonably infer that there will be elements of contemporary doctrine, focussed on identifiably timeless constituents of the Operational Art, which can reasonably be borne backwards through time to evaluate nineteenth century operations. Certainly the high-Victorian versions of today's Campaign Design and Campaign Management processes can readily be traced in the pages of the official histories of the 1882 and 1884-5 campaigns, as well as in other directly relevant sources, such as Wolseley's campaign journals and official government communications. It is substantially for this reason that it was the art of command and the campaign planning process which jointly emerged as the most legitimate and sustainable tools for the conduct of 'rationalist' analysis. It will be helpful to note that contemporary British doctrine considers that command has three classic constituents, which it identifies as decision-making, leadership and control.⁴ It will be appropriate, therefore, to lay particular emphasis on these three fields in the narrativist chapters. All that said, there will be no contrived attempt herein to bounce back and forth between historical passages of operations and passages of contemporary doctrine. The latter functions in the role of the foundational knowledge

¹ Dr Brian Holden-Reid, *War Fighting Doctrine and the British Army*, Army Doctrine Publication *Operations*, vol. 1, (MOD, 1994), Annex A to Ch. 1, p. 1A-1. At the time Holden-Reid was the resident historian at the Army Staff College, Camberley.

² Prof. Gary Sheffield, *Doctrine and Command in the British Army: An Historical Overview*, ADP *Operations*, (DCDC Shrivenham, MOD, 2010).

³ 'Attritionalist' is used here in the military doctrinal sense of striving to inflict heavy loss on the enemy: Montgomery, who had served in the Great War, generally went to great lengths to try and minimise his own losses.

⁴ ADP *Operations*, Ch. 6, pp. 6-10/6-11.

against which the narrativist inferences of the thesis can be tested. To cite contemporary doctrine repeatedly will be to run the risk of tripping over it, in the course of an exercise intended to be one in military history. Thus, it will be cited only where compellingly relevant to the immediate point in hand: to coin a phrase, 'less will be more'.

Contemplation of the array of contemporary British doctrine determined that the components best suited both to the conduct of legitimate rationalist analysis, and to rendering the Nile Expedition more accessible to present-day instructors and learners, is to be found in the first instance at Chapters 6 and 7, ('Command of Operations' and 'Orchestrating Operations' respectively), of *ADP Operations* (2010).¹ Also of relevance and resonance is Chapter 2, the mainstay chapter, of *JDP 5-00 Campaign Planning*. It is to these documents that recourse will be made in conducting the candid 'lessons learned' exercise evaded by Wolseley 128 years ago. The reader should note that definitions of the principal doctrinal terms commonly used in the modern campaign planning process are incorporated within the glossary. They have been directly derived from the UK doctrinal publications cited above, albeit in some instances I have had the temerity to edit, adapt or abridge some of the 'official' definitions in the pursuit of enhanced clarity or brevity.

3.4.4 Experience and Precedent as Yardsticks

By way of essential context, the next chapter will briefly reprise Wolseley's long career and vast experience of war. If, understandably, there are limits on the extent to which modern-day doctrine can be utilised for evaluating the performance of senior officers in nineteenth century Sudan, Wolseley's impressive pedigree up to and including Tel-el-Kebir in and of itself provides an readily adaptable benchmarking tool. If he had planned highly successful campaigns of a comparable scale before, then it would seem not unreasonable to expect that he might in the Sudan have done so again. He had after all, in only a few weeks, conquered Egypt from a standing start. It seems not unreasonable either that Wolseley's own maxims, as espoused in *The Soldier's Pocket-Book*, also be utilised as a yardstick.

3.5 GAUGING THE PERFORMANCE OF VICTORIAN COMMANDERS

While British officers were present as observers in all the major North American and Continental conflicts of the high-Victorian age,² and British military thought was by no means either sterile, or concentrated solely on the small wars of empire, Holden-Reid makes the valuable point that, 'Military thought and doctrine are not synonymous. The first is personal, the latter institutional.'³ In that context we should note that while it

¹ The publication proclaims itself, 'the primary source of UK higher level doctrine for the land operating environment'.

² Of the principal figures in subsequent chapters, Wolseley visited Lee's Army of Northern Virginia, Wilson, Brackenbury and Swaine were observers of the Franco-Prussian War, while Baker and Burnaby fought in the Russo-Turkish War, where Kitchener was also a visitor.

³ Holden-Reid, *War Fighting Doctrine*, 1A-2.

was commonplace for Victorian officers to put pen to paper in leading periodicals, such as *Blackwoods* or *The Nineteenth Century*, or to give vent to their thoughts in learned texts,¹ nothing was published prior to the Nile Expedition which bore the official stamp of either Horse Guards or the War Office and which would recognizably pass for the holistic 'British Military Doctrine' of its day. But with all due regard to Holden-Reid, that is not the whole story.

3.5.1 Essential Context: Army Reform, Age of Transition and the Ring System

In order to contextualise quite where this period sits in the conceptual development of the British Army, it might perhaps be instructive to note that it was only in the period 1870-1 that HMG had legislated, first, under the *War Office Act*, to subordinate the 'royal' Commander in Chief to the Secretary of State for War, and second, under the *Regulation of the Forces Act*, to terminate 'purchase' – the practice under which an officer's vacancy constituted an item of property with a (theoretically regulated) fiscal value.² Because purchase seems so anachronistic to our modern minds, we should not permit the relatively late date of its abolition to trick us into characterising the Army up to that point as institutionally unprofessional: there were in fact tolerably effective checks and balances built into the purchase system, while the government's habitually tight grip on spending had always presented a far greater impediment to military modernity than had the impeccable social origins of the officer class. In effect the *Regulation of the Forces Act* saw the government buy back the army's fighting regiments from their stake-holding officers' messes, at the then astronomical cost of £6m in compensation. These two illustrative examples of major reforms, dating from only a decade and a half earlier, serve to emphasise that the Khartoum affair arose in what for the British Army was an age of dramatic and multi-faceted transition – the transition from Lord Raglan's Crimean army and the rifled musket, to Sir John French's BEF and the Vickers gun. Of course this half-century of rapid military transition was in no sense particular to the British, who sometimes had to run to keep up with their Continental counterparts.

The Cardwell Reforms marked the end of an era and coincided with the rise of Wolseley and Roberts, identifiably the phase in the development of the British officer corps which heralded the death-knell of the 'cult of the amateur' and the rise of the studious professional. Wolseley was of course notorious for making repeated use in his campaigns of the same circle of talented subordinates, referred to at first as the 'Ashanti Ring' and later as the 'Wolseley Ring'. Excluded officers, the vast majority in other words, took to referring to the chosen few as the 'Wolseley Gang'.³ The 'Chief' himself interpreted the practice as a function of professionalism and certainly followed his own written maxim on the subject cited above.

¹ A *Soldier's Pocket-Book* is perhaps the most obvious example, but see also such publications as Capt. Valentine Baker, *The British Cavalry: With Remarks on its Practical Organization*, (London, 1858).

² Famously Sir Henry Havelock, a brigadier-general at 62, had once remarked that he had been purchased over by 'three fools and two sots'.

³ Villiers, *Five Decades*, ii, 58.

There is a case to be made over the long view that Wolseley might not have been as gifted a talent-spotter as he believed himself to be. Of course the alternative interpretation is that individually some senior members of the Ring failed, on rising to command level, to live up to the high promise they had once displayed. General Sir Redvers Buller, positively berated by historians for his performance in the Ladysmith Campaign,¹ had always been championed by Wolseley. Lieutenant General Sir William Butler, who like Buller is a central figure in the ensuing discursive chapters, was fired as GOC South Africa for demonstrating pro-Afrikaner sentiment in the run-in to the Anglo-Boer War. Frederick Maurice, Wolseley's court historian as it were, rose to major general but was then deemed, even by his old chief, to be temperamentally unsuited to command appointments. There had been a time in the 1870s when Colonel Sir George Colley had occupied the position of favourite of favourites, but operating in South Africa as a local major general, Colley displayed the operational naiveté and tactical ineptitude which was to see him thrice defeated by the rebellious Transvaalers, including a final fiasco at Majuba Hill in which he lost his life.² It is instructive that Wolseley's faith in the infallibility of his own judgement was so ingrained that his Nile journal laments that, 'there are very few first rate men...such as for instance as poor Colley was...'.³

It was ironic that it was Herbert Stewart, the one officer who had alone been close to Colley as he hatched his tactically naive and politically inappropriate Majuba plot, who now succeeded his deceased superior as the Ring's newly anointed favourite son.⁴ Wolseley had first come across Stewart as a disgruntled staff captain, on the point of resignation, in the immediate aftermath of the Zulu War, but since then had engineered his rapid rise to colonel. As the commander of Graham's cavalry arm, Stewart had been able to execute that increasingly rare operation of war, a brigade charge, at 2nd El Teb. Unfortunately he mistimed his attack, with the result that the 10th and 19th Hussars sustained needlessly heavy casualties.⁵ But the long and short of it was that Stewart was not only an experienced fighting soldier, but so much an acolyte of Wolseley that any set of criteria by which the latter's generalship is judged will readily suffice for Stewart also. Sir Charles Wilson, by contrast, did not have any experience of war to draw upon. This places him in a quite separate category to Stewart, but he was a product of the same army, and directly succeeded him in the field, so that criteria appropriate to Stewart will also have to be transferred onto the persona of Wilson. He is thus required at least to match the professional competence of the man regarded as the most talented member of the Ring. Wolseley would have considered this a tough standard to meet, and plainly concluded that it was an object in which Wilson failed.

¹ *vide* Leo Amery's *The Times History of the War in South Africa*, (London, 1902).

² For the most recently published full length treatment of the Majuba Campaign see Prof. John Laband, *The Transvaal Rebellion: The First Boer War 1880-1881*, (Harlow, 2005).

³ Wolseley, journal entry 30 Nov 84; see Preston (ed.), *Relief of Gordon*, 76.

⁴ Wolseley, journal entry 19 Feb 85, *Ibid*, 149: [on Stewart] 'I cannot hope to see his like again. He was out & out the best man I had about me...'.
⁵ Official despatches: Graham to Hartington, 2 Mar. 84; *Supplement to the London Gazette*, 25 Mar. 84.

3.5.2 Contemporaneous State of the Military Art

Bound up in the moral imperative to comment on command performance justly and appropriately, which is to say with due regard to the commonly accepted precepts of the day, is the consequent necessity to be able to empathise with the high-Victorian army's understanding of the art of war. It is unnecessary to review the state of British military thought in the high-Victorian era as the exercise has been admirably executed in the past.¹ For present purposes it is enough to demonstrate that the principal role-players on the Nile would have been exposed to a good deal of 'military thought', which, although it might at first glance appear somewhat dated to the modern eye, actually advocates precepts for campaigning which are not so far removed from our own day as to be either unintelligible or devoid of merit.

The most notable example of British 'military thought' from the high-Victorian era was *The Operations of War*, first published in 1866 by Colonel (later General Sir) Edward Hamley. Having fought in all the Crimean battles, Hamley was subsequently appointed to the newly-founded (1858) Staff College as its Professor of Military History, a post he held from 1859-65. Hamley had genuine literary talent and while it would be true to say that he did not directly conceive any notable strategic precepts, he did write and lecture on nineteenth century warfare with admirable fluidity. From 1870-77 he held sway over the evolution of British military thought as the Commandant of the Staff College. In his preface to *The Soldier's Pocket Book for Field Service* (London, 1871), Wolseley gave Hamley's *magnum opus* a ringing endorsement:

I have confined myself to subjects in connection with the duties of regimental and staff officers, remaining silent upon the science of war, considering that its extent would render it out of place here. I take the liberty, however, of urging upon my comrades of all ranks the necessity for a thorough and careful study of that science. The facilities for acquiring military knowledge are great since the establishment of Garrison Instructors at our large stations; and that best of all works upon strategy and tactics, Colonel Hamley's "Operations of War," is to be had at any booksellers.

A decade after these words were written, Wolseley selected Lieutenant General Sir Edward Hamley KCMG, CB, by then commonly regarded as the leading British strategist of the age, to command the 2nd Division in the Egyptian intervention. In the close conditions of campaigning it was always inevitable that two such egotists would eventually fall out. Hamley seems at times to have comported himself as if he was there to advise Wolseley. Then, Wolseley, in pursuing his deception plan, a subject on which the *Soldier's Pocket-Book* has much to say, failed to expose the next stage of his campaign plan to his senior commanders, as a result of which Hamley was left in the dark for a short period. This led to heightened tensions, until eventually an exceptionally undignified row broke out over Hamley's public assertion that Wolseley's Tel-el-Kebir despatch had failed to do justice either to him or to the officers and men of his division.

¹ See bibliography; Luvaas 1965, Spiers 1992, Bond 1972.

Under Moran's definition, as well as numerous others, the pairing of Hamley's *The Operations of War* and Wolseley's *A Soldier's Pocket-Book for Field Service* can be interpreted to constitute the British military doctrine of the high-Victorian era – the former addressing the strategic and operational levels of war and the latter procedures and drills at the tactical level – not that, technically speaking, this would satisfy Holden-Reid's stipulation that in order to constitute doctrine, military thought must also be 'institutional'. But the actuality is that most British officers who aspired to professional excellence did read Hamley and Wolseley, if for no other reason than to avoid the dated, (and to many officers indecipherable), Jomini and Clausewitz. Hamley's book by contrast, published six years before Clausewitz was first translated into English, reflected not only on Napoleonic practice, but was adapted each time a war of note occurred. Thus, later editions, (there were five in all), also addressed the American Civil War, the Austro-Prussian War and the Franco-Prussian War. Moreover, whilst it might not have borne an official Horse Guards or War Office stamp, *The Operations of War* was the Staff College's officially adopted text on strategy, which was about as close to institutional as it was possible to come in the Victorian army. Hamley's gravitas is plainly not to be underestimated. Lee is known to have sent to England for a copy of his book in 1866, (just a little too late for it to be as useful as might once have been the case), and subsequently exchanged letters with Hamley.¹ Von Moltke² and Sherman likewise received copies and also corresponded with the author. It might well have been Sherman's patronage which resulted in the book becoming the endorsed strategic text of the US Artillery School from 1870 onwards.³ The following short extract demonstrates that Hamley and modern manoeuvrist philosophy are not without a certain resonance:

Strategic movements will be considered as having the following objects: 1st, To menace or assail the enemy's communications with his base; 2nd, To destroy the coherence and concerted action of his army, by breaking the communications which connect the parts; 3rd, To effect superior concentrations on particular parts.

In addition to the unofficial doctrine provided by Hamley and Wolseley, parts of *Queen's Regulations* and a number of special-to-arm manuals, such as *Field Exercise and Evolutions of Infantry*,⁴ can, under almost any definition, be regarded as doctrinal in nature. Such documents were official, prescribed and often learned by rote in an army which was far more 'professional' than is commonly recognised, thus safely satisfying the Holden-Reid stipulation. Where then did all this leave the Victorian military?

¹ Alexander Innes Shand, *Life of General Sir E. B. Hamley* [2 vols.], (London, 1895), i, 185.

² Von Moltke to Hamley, 15 Mar. 1867, quoted at Shand, *Life of Hamley*, i, 183-4. 'I beg you to accept my very best thanks and at the same time my sincere congratulations as author of so valuable and interesting a work.' Moltke went on to say that he had arranged to have accurate maps of the 1866 battlefields forwarded to Hamley, 'as a token of the pleasure your work has given me, and of respect for its author.'

³ Bvt. Maj. Gen. Wm. F. Barry to Hamley, 27 May 1870, quoted at Shand, *Life of Hamley*, i, 191.

⁴ Replaced in 1888 by *The Infantry Drill*.

3.5.3 Victorian Campaign Planning

In forming a view on the sophistication of high-Victorian campaign planning, it is necessary only to address precedents relevant to the performance of the Wolseley Ring. The first pointer to its operational efficiency can be gleaned from the closest thing we have to an official history of the Asante¹ conflict, namely Brackenbury's hastily written *The Ashanti War; A Narrative*, (London, 1874). This is just one of a number of works which amply demonstrate that the essential tenets of Campaign Design and Campaign Management were practised effectively in the 1870s and early 1880s. By way of illustration, Brackenbury's book incorporates in full the strategic political direction given to Wolseley by Lord Kimberley, in his capacity as Secretary of State for the Colonies, as well as the more limited instructions provided by Cardwell from the War Office. Independent works by war-correspondents, such as those Brackenbury had set out to pre-empt, the efforts of H. M. Stanley and Winwood Reade, also verify the high-Victorian understanding of campaign planning.²

Unlike the Asante War, the Egyptian intervention of 1882 was afforded the privilege of an official history. Maurice's work, though nothing like as detailed as Colville's coverage of the Sudan, also demonstrates that the campaign planning process of the 1880s was by no means very far removed from where we stand today, albeit the language of the time was more stately and far less pseudo-scientific than we have lately grown accustomed to. For example, Maurice's Chapter V, headed 'The Detailed Plan of Campaign: Difficulties to be Overcome and Intended Mode of Meeting Them', commences by outlining eight sequenced and overlapping 'steps' which would have to be enacted, 'To effect the purpose of marching on Cairo'.³ The latter we might today characterise as an (arguably slightly clumsy) articulation of a Campaign Objective,⁴ while the former would certainly constitute Decisive Conditions⁵ and Lines of Operation en route to its attainment.

It is instructive to note that even before Wolseley left the War Office for the Egyptian theatre of operations, he had forecast, in a written campaign planning paper dated 3 July 1882, that the decisive action of his campaign was likely to be fought at an obscure place in the desert, 100 km to the east of Cairo, called Tel-el-Kebir. Nobody else at the War Office had heard of it at the time, while the army went ashore at Alexandria, well to the west of Cairo. Wolseley's reference to Tel-el-Kebir had been penned some 2½ months before the battle of the same name,⁶ a fact which speaks volumes of the professional competence a Victorian planning staff was capable of attaining. It follows that it is no sense inappropriate or historically unsustainable to adopt the broad principles of campaign planning as a means of gauging the performance of commanders operating in nineteenth century Sudan.

¹ The preferred contemporary rendering of 'Ashanti'.

² Not least in the sense that both Stanley and Reade criticised Wolseley's campaign management in certain domains, (notably logistics), as well as praising it in others. Stanley also took him to task for his notorious prejudice against 'hacks'.

³ Maurice, *Campaign of 1882 in Egypt*, 23.

⁴ See JDP 5-00, *Campaign Planning*, Ch. 2, Para. 230, p. 2-14.

⁵ Ibid, Ch. 2, Para. 231, pp. 2-14-2-15.

⁶ Maurice, *Campaign of 1882 in Egypt*, 5.

3.6 EXECUTION OF THE RESEARCH

3.6.1 Study Modules and Lines of Enquiry

The underpinning research paradigm can be seen at Schematic 1 and the accompanying notes. The research was then executed as a literature and preparatory phase, three enabling modules, a fieldwork phase (see Appendix B), nine themed mainstream research modules, a drafting and review phase and a finishing phase. There was also an associated range day (see Appendix C). The research having been divided into a succession of themed modules, each module was then broken down into a number of lines of enquiry as follows:

- a. **Fall of Khartoum.** What was the strength of the besieging force and how was it deployed? What factors determined the circumstances and timing of the city's fall? How long did Gordon believe he could hold out and was his assessment communicated to Wolseley? Was it realistic of Wolseley to expect that the arrival of a few red-coated British soldiers would compel the Mahdī to raise the siege? Is it true, as Gladstone and Wolseley were both to suggest, that the city fell through treachery, an assertion which they considered mitigated any question of negligence on their part?
- b. **The Wilson Controversy.** How, when and by what means did the controversy unfold? Precisely what was Wilson accused of and by whom? What evidence is there to suggest that the accusations were either justified or groundless? How did Wilson justify his actions? Can his version of events and explanations be verified by other witnesses?
- c. **Operations in the Red Sea Littoral.** What was the impact of Graham's first Suakin campaign on Osman Digna's military capacity? What was the gist of the intelligence reports from Suakin in the autumn of 1884? Did the Suakin-Berber road represent a logistically and tactically viable alternative to the Nile? How might an operation mounted from the east have been managed? What would its prospects of success have been and how does it compare with the Nile axis? What inferences can be drawn from the events of the Second Suakin Campaign?
- d. **Wolseley's Operational Estimate and Campaign Design.** What do we know about Wolseley's consideration and weighting of options? When did he do his contingency planning and what timelines did he set at the outset? Why did he select the Nile axis? Did he waver at all? Why was the Admiralty reticent about the Nile? How did it come about that Wolseley and not Stephenson ended up as the theatre commander? How was the whaler scheme meant to work? How did Wolseley plan to utilize the Camel Corps? What roles did he assign to senior members of the Ring? Did he get his way in respect of senior appointments or was he thwarted in any way?

e. **Capability and Capacity of the Adversaries.** What size of force did Wolseley ask for? Was there anything he requested which was refused and might have impacted adversely on the prospects of success? How was the fighting echelon of the expedition organized? How able or otherwise were the tactical level commanders? How was the Camel Corps organized, how was it meant to operate and what was it supposed to do? How much modern weaponry did the Mahdīst army have at its disposal? How was it organized, what was its strength and what was its tactical doctrine? Why was the siege of Khartoum not pressed hard from the outset? What would the Mahdīsts' prospects have been in an Omdurman style battle of decision?

f. **Execution of the Campaign Plan (Campaign Management).** How did Wolseley adapt his plan to reflect starting so late? How did the troops fare on the Nile? What impediments to progress occurred? What messages, news or data reached Wolseley from Khartoum? Why did he launch Stewart's brigade across the Bayūda Desert? What were the tactical implications of the logistic shuttle-run to Jakdul Wells? How were the operations of the River Column and the Desert Column meant to complement each other? Why was there an apparent shortage of camels? How did the camel transport fare? Did the whaler scheme achieve everything expected of it? What was Wolseley's intention on 8 January 1885, when he despatched Stewart's force for Metemmeh? What orders did he give and what were their implications? What did he expect to happen? What was his reading of the enemy picture? What key decisions did he take, when, and were they sound? To what extent might the operational level context have set the conditions for tactical level failure?

g. **Operations of the Desert Column.** How did the Mahdīst high command respond to Stewart's advance? Which elements of the Mahdīst army contested the British approach to Abu Klea? How did the battle unfold? How did it come about that a British square was broken? What was the problem with the Heavy Camel Regiment? What were the battle's implications for the campaign plan? How did the 18/19 January night-march impact on the tactical situation confronting the British at Abu Kru? What was the size of the Mahdīst force, how had it been reinforced since Abu Klea and who was in command? What was the tactical situation when Wilson succeeded to the command? How did he perform as a battlefield commander? Is it the case that he procrastinated about advancing to the river? What was the state of the command when it reached the Nile? What were the battle's implications? What was Wilson's intention in respect of Metemmeh? How many Mahdīsts were inside the town? Why did Wilson not press his attack and were his reasons for not doing so sound?

h. **The River Dash.** Precisely how long did Wilson delay in setting out for Khartoum? What were his reasons for doing so and were they justified? Could

he have set out sooner and what would have happened if he had? What disinformation surrounds this issue? How close did Wilson get to Khartoum? Did he press boldly or did he turn too early? On what grounds did he conclude that Khartoum had fallen and does his reasoning hold water?

i. **After the Fall of Khartoum and Deductions.** How well prepared was Wolseley for success? What did he intend to do if he had reached Khartoum in time? What would the practical problems of such a scenario have been? How might they have been overcome? Was it ever possible for the British Army to have saved Gordon and, if it was, how might it have been effected? Should Wilson be condemned or exonerated? Why did the campaign plan miscarry and to what extent did Wolseley himself set the conditions for failure? If it is true that he behaved disingenuously afterwards, what caused him to behave in that way?

3.6.2 Collating the Evidence

The composition of the evidence has already been touched upon in Chapter 2, but will nonetheless bear being briefly itemised, with illustrative examples:

- a. **Participant Accounts by Officers and Soldiers:** (e.g. magazine articles by the likes of Talbot, Dawson, Gascoigne and Parke; or full-length treatments such as *From Korti to Khartum*, *The River Column*, *The Campaign of the Cataracts* and *With the Camel Corps up the Nile*).
- b. **Participant Accounts by War-correspondents:** (e.g. Macdonald's *Too Late for Gordon and Khartoum*).
- c. **Contemporaneous Diaries and Journals:** (e.g. Wolseley, Trafford and Verner).
- d. **Newspaper Reporting by 'Special Correspondents':** (e.g. Burleigh for the *Daily Telegraph*, Pearse for the *Daily News* and Williams for the *Daily Chronicle*).
- e. **Newspaper Commentary:** (e.g. 'Our military expert' in the pages of the *Times*).
- f. **Official Telegraphic Traffic:** (e.g. Baring-Granville, Hartington-Wolseley, etc, typically found in Parliamentary Blue Books.)
- g. **Official Documents:** (e.g. War-Diary, memoranda between commanders, casualty returns, etc).

- h. **Written Orders:** (e.g. Wolseley to Stewart, Wilson and Beresford, 7 Jan. 1885; Orders-Book of the Desert Column).
- i. **The Contemporaneous Intelligence Picture:** (this is not readily accessible but can be collated from such sources as Verner's Diary, *From Korti to Khartoum*, the War-Diary of the Desert Column and official telegraphic traffic).
- j. **Official Despatches:** (e.g. Stewart's Official Despatch for Abu Klea, 18 Jan. 1885; Wilson's first and supplementary reports on Abu Kru and Metemmeh).
- k. **The Official History.**
- l. **Contemporaneous Military Manuals:** (e.g. *Field Exercise and Evolutions of Infantry*, [1877 and 1884 editions]; *Report on the Egyptian Provinces of the Sudan, Red Sea, and Equator, Compiled in the Intelligence Branch of the War Office* [revised to July 1884]).
- m. **Autobiographies and Memoirs:** (e.g. Dundonald's *My Army Life*, Prior's *Campaigns of a War-correspondent*).
- n. **Visual:** (e.g. Prior's work for the *Illustrated London News* and Verner's *Sketches from the Soudan*.)
- o. **Physical:** the operational and tactical implications of geography and 'ground'.
- p. **Contemporaneous Marked Maps and Schematics:** (e.g. those drawn by Verner).

3.6.3 Confirmation of Research Objectives

Following completion of the fieldwork phase, the raft of resultant discoveries were reviewed and incorporated. This review process led to the following list of objectives for the written submission:

- a. Give an insight into the respective characters of Wolseley and Wilson and demonstrate exactly how the Wilson controversy played itself out. Draw out the precise nature of the allegations, so that their validity can be determined.
- b. Describe Wolseley's Campaign Estimate, the process of Campaign Design and the evolution of a worked up Campaign Plan. Analyse its strengths

and weaknesses. Comment on the efficacy of the whaler scheme and the camel-borne brigade.

c. Analyse the Campaign Review and Campaign Management processes at the operational level, with particular emphasis on time and space. Highlight critical decision points and be able to identify any occasion on which operational level decision-making foundered.

d. Consider the conduct and implications of the preliminary logistic shuttle to Jakdul Wells. Establish the compromise of British intent and describe the Mahdīst response. Be able to draw on the Bayūda crossing as precedent when discussing the Suakin-Berber axis.

e. Establish what orders were given by Wolseley to tactical level role-players and comment on their implications.

f. Establish the reasons why Khartoum fell when it did and comment on the implications for British operations.

g. Review the direction of operations at the tactical level of command, drawing out any failures of judgement. Establish the impact of the resistance in the Bayūda on the Desert Column. Establish why the action at Abu Kru proved quite so fraught for the British and assess Wilson's performance as a battlefield commander. Consider Wilson's operation against Metemneh on 21 January 1885 and form a view as to whether he can be justly criticised for its outcome.

h. Examine the reasons for the two-day delay at Metemneh and form a view on whether it was inadvisable or unavoidable. Determine its relevance to the outcome of the campaign.

i. Resolve whether at any point Sir Charles Wilson demonstrated any want of courage, good judgment or resolve. Identify any exhibitions of excellence on his part.

j. Be able to state in a quantifiable way the true nature of the British military position at the operational and tactical levels when Khartoum fell.

k. Identify from whence Wolseley derived his interpretation of events in which he played no part.

l. Articulate in conclusion a balanced assessment of Wilson's performance in command, and an objective judgement on the extent and nature of the British Army's failure to reach Khartoum in time. Be able to address culpability at the various levels of command.

3.6.4 Summary of Method

The general principles of campaign planning were well understood within the high-Victorian Army, a far more 'professional' organization than generalist historians tend to credit. Wolseley was a well proven commander and a serious student of the art of war. If contemporary British doctrine resorts to rather more 'systematic' process and specialised terminology, the theory and practice of campaign planning, then and now, has remained broadly constant. By focussing on the 'big ideas' of command, campaign planning and the operational art, and by adherence to the paradigm of 'intelligent tempering', it will be possible for rationalist analysis to enjoy legitimacy, notwithstanding the passage of 128 years. Thus lessons learned from 1884-5 can enjoy *bona fide* relevance to the modern military practitioner. New historical findings are likely to prove of future benefit to historians working across a number of fields; history of the Sudan, history of the British Army, small wars, biography of Wolseley and so on.

The methodology can be considered to incorporate two primary lines of investigation, reflecting the operational and tactical levels of war. Thus the thesis will proceed from Chapter 5 onwards, first, to analyse Campaign Design and Campaign Management, with particular emphasis on 'Time and Space' as the primary planning factor. This should establish whether or not time had run down to such an extent that it was no longer possible for the key tactical commanders, Stewart then Wilson, to attain the Campaign Objective on behalf of their higher commander. Second, it will analyse the tactical conduct of operations to establish the veracity or otherwise of the allegations levelled against Wilson. At the end of this twin-track enquiry the *bona fide* reasons for the failure of the Khartoum Campaign should have become apparent.

3.6.5 Sequence of the Thesis

- a. The introductory chapter outlined the scope of the research, delineated the knowledge gap and offered observations on originality. The second half of the chapter contextualised matters by describing the geography of the theatre of operations and the historical background to the campaign.
- b. The literature review at Chapter 2 contemplated historiography and primary source evidence. It concluded that the Wilson controversy was renewed after his death and that it has remained substantially unresolved down to the present day.
- c. This methodology chapter has described and justified the epistemological approach to the research and has reflected on the dangers of cognitive bias. It then moved on to frame the terms in which the 'leadership, decision-making and control' of the principal British role-players can be objectively analysed over the discursive chapters to come. It has also established that the operational art and campaign planning constitute appropriate and legitimate tools for rationalist analysis. The second half of the

chapter described how the research and associated fieldwork was designed, structured and executed.

d. Chapter 4 will compare and contrast the careers and personalities of Wolseley and Wilson, before proceeding to establish the shape, form and sequencing of the 'Wilson Controversy'. It will establish what Wilson was accused of, by whom, when and why. It will also consider what measures he took to defend himself.

e. Chapters 5, 6 and 7 are the discursive chapters and are presented in narrativist form. They are designed to draw out closely reasoned inferences which will inform the conclusions. They will aim to contextualise and analyse British Campaign Design and Campaign Management between April 1884 and January 1885. While there will inevitably be some crossover, it is broadly the case that Chapters 5 and 6 will address the operational level, while Chapter 7 will concentrate on matters tactical. In order that the flow and logic of the analysis interwoven into these three chapters can be followed, significant developments will be described in sequence. Whilst, therefore, there must inevitably be some element of narrative, which empiricist history by its very nature cannot forego, this will be a means to an end and not an end in its own right.

(i). Chapter 5 will describe and analyse how British Campaign Design was conducted, beginning with Wolseley's contemplation of the military options in April 1884. It will then aim to show how the selection of the Nile axis left the expedition consistently behind the clock and how this led to the adoption of an arbitrary timetable for the relief of Khartoum.

(ii). Chapter 6 will describe and analyse Campaign Management at the operational level and the evolution of a self-contained tactical level. The chapter will seek to trace Wolseley's thinking and will reflect the ways in which he adapted his plan over time. Importantly it will also seek to establish Wolseley's 'intent'¹ and what written orders he issued prior to Stewart's crossing of the Bayūda.

(iii) Chapter 7 will consider the tactical level denouement of the campaign, with emphasis on Wilson's time in command. It must therefore contemplate the general actions at Abu Klea (17 January) and Abu Kru (19 January), including the intervening night march, the abortive attack on Metemmeh (21 January) and the steamer dash to Khartoum (24-28 January).

¹ Current British doctrine observes that, 'A clear intent initiates a force's purposeful activity. It represents what the commander wants to achieve and why; and binds the force together. It is the principal result of decision-making.' ADP *Operations*, Ch. 6, 6-11.

- f. Chapter 8 will be devoted to wider analysis and interpretation.
- g. Chapter 9 will summarise the conclusions inferred from Chapters 4-8. It will reprise the operational level realities and will arrive at a reasoned adjudication of the 'Wilson Controversy'. Finally it will reflect the contribution to knowledge made by this thesis and will identify opportunities for further research.

3.7 LEAD INTO CHAPTER 4

The next chapter traces the course of the Wilson Controversy in detail. It began on 23 March 1885, the point at which it became clear to Sir Charles that Lord Wolseley blamed him for the expedition's failure and that he could expect to be castigated for the two-day 'delay' at Metemmeh. Perhaps the most remarkable thing about the Wilson Controversy is that the matter has not been compellingly resolved, one way or the other, before now.

Chapter 4

THE SHAPE AND FORM OF THE WILSON CONTROVERSY

4.1 BACKGROUND

By the spring of 1884 Wolseley was holding high office as the Adjutant-General, was widely thought of as Britain's most able soldier and enjoyed a degree of global renown. The Gordon Relief Expedition, which at first appeared unlikely by dint of Wolseley's great seniority to come his way, would in the end prove to be his last field command. It was also the only campaign in which he did not attain a notable victory. For a man obsessed with reputation and standing, this came as a cruel blow.¹ It was never meant to turn out like that: the relief of Khartoum should have been a crowning triumph. Wolseley never quite got over it and, for the rest of his life, failed to accept responsibility for the campaign's unsuccessful outcome.

The Nile Expedition was of note for its dependence on what might be termed 'operational originality'. There were two measures in particular which Wolseley characterised as, 'novel expedients'.² The first was moving two brigades of infantry from Wādī Halfā to Khartoum aboard a fleet of specially commissioned whalers; small-boats provided with both oars and sails, capable of carrying a crew of 12 and rations sufficient to sustain them for 100 days. This particular expedient had a sub-plot too; if 'Tommy' was not a natural boatman, Wolseley would provide him with helpers who were. A corps of civilian *voyageurs*, Native American and Canadian backwoodsmen, would be brought from the new world to the old, to provide the army with small-boat expertise. A second and smaller party of boatmen, made up of black African *krooboys* from the Gold Coast, would also participate. The presence of these contingents was predicated on the experience of the Red River Expedition (1870)³ and the Second Anglo-Asante War (1873-4).⁴ The second of Wolseley's novel ideas would be providing his mounted brigade not with hardy Levantine ponies, but with dromedaries.

There was much to commend both measures, although they each had distinct disadvantages too. If one could strip out *time* as the single most important factor in the equation, Wolseley's campaign plan could probably be held up as a masterpiece of military improvisation and a classic exercise in achieving operational 'reach'. Unfortunately for the great man successful application of the operational art relies not on grandstanding one's originality, but on the most important planning factors being afforded the prominence which is their due. From beginning to end it was always about the balance between time, risk and logistic sustainability. But the greatest of these was time.

¹ See for example Wolseley to his wife, 22 Feb. 85; 'You must tell me whether society is down on me for being too late to save Gordon...'. See Arthur (ed.), *Wolseley Letters*, 171.

² Wolseley, journal entry 19 Oct. 84; see Preston (ed.), *Relief of Gordon*, 43.

³ For Wolseley's personal recollections of the campaign see *A Soldier's Life*, ii, 165-224.

⁴ *Ibid*, ii, 257-370.

The question of whether Wolseley's more innovative measures were indeed expedient, or instead amounted only to mere novelty, is not something we should address without having properly contemplated the evidence, although in the summer of 1884 there was a positive rush to judgement. The campaign plan was controversial and far from widely supported when its outlines became public. If the odd expression of doubt was articulated in the Home Army, there was positive dissent in the Army of Occupation in Cairo, while armchair generals, 'clubmen' and retired officers were moved to scorn, much of which found its way into the newspapers.¹ Colonel William Butler, the architect of the whaler scheme, wrote, 'Day after day, the columns of the London Press held letters denouncing or ridiculing our arrangements.'² Above all else the cynics were unable to comprehend why Cairo, the best part of 1,650 river miles from Khartoum, had been identified as the ideal jumping-off point, when there was a perfectly good sea-port 245 miles east of Berber. It was true that there was likely to be trouble with Osman Digna and the rebellious Bija along the caravan road, but they had already been twice defeated and if they chose to force the issue could be beaten again. These were the essential outlines of the so-called 'Battle of the Routes', which commenced in the letters pages of the newspapers in April 1884, sucked in a recalcitrant Admiralty over the course of the summer, and finally drew to a close on 26 August, when the Secretary of State for War telegraphed Sir Frederick Stephenson as follows:

*After anxious consideration, Her Majesty's Government have come to the conclusion that it is unjust to ask you to be responsible for directing an operation which, after full knowledge of plan, you consider to be impracticable. They have therefore decided to send Lord Wolseley to take temporarily the chief command in Egypt. Government highly appreciate the manner in which you have carried out the important and difficult duties of your command, and earnestly hope that you will feel able to remain in Egypt whilst Lord Wolseley is there, and assist him with your advice.*³

For the previous fortnight Stephenson had been mounting a futile resistance against the settled will of the Adjutant-General; futile because the true denouement of the 'Battle of the Routes' had actually taken place on the afternoon of Tuesday 12 August, when Colonel Butler, who for the previous week had been working feverishly on putting the whaler scheme together, was summoned to attend upon, 'a high Government official'.⁴ Neither in his *Campaign of the Cataracts* nor his later autobiography does he state openly who this was, although in the latter he provides the additional clue that it was a 'parliamentarian'. He was ushered in to find the principal figure, (assuredly Lord Hartington), surrounded by officials of the 'contracts and finance departments'. Butler was asked if he really thought it possible that the

¹ Wolseley, journal entry 19 Oct. 84; see Preston (ed.), *Relief of Gordon*, 43.

² Butler, *Campaign of the Cataracts*, 35.

³ Hartington to Wolseley, 26 Aug. 84; see Egypt No. 35/1884, 60-1.

⁴ Butler, *Campaign of the Cataracts*, 28.

boatyards of Britain could construct 400 whalers to his demanding specification inside 28 days, as the minister had read in the colonel's most recently submitted paper, an enterprise which the Admiralty had insisted was certain to take twice as long. Butler replied that he was sure it could be done, adding that all his preparatory work was complete and that the only thing he still needed was the authority to commit to expenditure. The minister responded by penning a note which said simply, 'Colonel Butler, You may proceed with the construction of four hundred boats.' According to Butler the 'high official' then turned to the assembled civil servants and said words to the effect of, 'Gentlemen, I have assembled you here to tell you that Colonel Butler has a blank cheque for the building and equipment of these boats, and his decisions as to expenditure are not to be questioned.' Butler placed orders with a total of 47 firms that evening.¹ From that point on, with contracts laid and money committed, it did not altogether matter what GOC Cairo or the Sirdar thought of the plan. On 22 August, by which time Hartington was attempting to secure the collective consent of the Queen Empress, the Duke, the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary to Wolseley's appointment as C-in-C Egypt,² Butler placed orders for another 400 boats.³

4.2 WOLSELEY AND WILSON – TWO CONTRASTING MILITARY LIVES

4.2.1 Life of Wolseley

Garnet Wolseley was an ensign⁴ in the 80th Regiment, when he first saw active service during the Second Anglo-Burmese War of 1852-3. His perception that there must surely be a correlation between gallantry and advancement resulted in his being both mentioned in despatches and badly wounded in his first fight.⁵ He was sent home to Ireland to recuperate and shortly afterwards was promoted by seniority to lieutenant.⁶ Having transferred into the 90th Light Infantry, he embarked with the regiment for the second half of the Crimean War.⁷ Not long after arriving at Balaclava, the 21-year old Wolseley was promoted to captain. Because all the action was taking place in the siege lines, he applied for secondment to the Royal Engineers. It was in the grim trenches before Sebastopol that he struck up a firm friendship with a young officer of the corps called Charley Gordon.⁸ Wolseley spent most of 1855 in the siege lines, where he displayed conspicuous bravery. He was wounded three times in all: on the second occasion, he and others were shredded by gravel, when a nearby gabion received a direct hit.⁹ Wolseley's injuries were severe and for a while it looked as if he would be blind for the rest of his days. After a few weeks recuperation, he regained the sight in one eye and promptly returned to duty on the headquarters staff. His other eye was

¹ See Butler, *Campaign of the Cataracts*, 10-31; *Autobiography*, 272-4.

² Wolseley, journal entries 23-6 Aug. 84 inclusive; see Preston (ed.), *Relief of Gordon*, 8-10.

³ Colvile, OH, i, 63.

⁴ A rank which was later designated 'sub-lieutenant' and subsequently 'second lieutenant'.

⁵ For Wolseley's upbringing see *A Soldier's Life*, i, 2-7; for Burma, 48-73.

⁶ Meaning that there was no more senior ensign in the regiment when a lieutenant's 'vacancy' occurred.

⁷ For his service in the Crimea; Ibid, i, 79-222.

⁸ Ibid, i, 147-8.

⁹ Ibid, i, 184-5.

indeed permanently blind, although the injury left no outward sign that this was so. In the summer of 1856 he helped organize the army's re-embarkation and was one of the last away from Balaklava. If it was evident that he had evolved into a competent and formidably brave young officer, it was also the case that he perceived only glory in war and had grown all but psychologically inured to its horrors.

In 1857 the 90th embarked for China. Three companies, including Wolseley's, sailed aboard HMS *Transit*, fated in due course to founder off the coast of Sumatra.¹ The embarked troops, under the overall command of the same Stephenson who would later rise to be GOC Cairo,² (at this point still only a lieutenant colonel), were rescued from a nearby island, only to learn that the Bengal Army had mutinied and that the 90th was now under orders for Calcutta. What the officers and men of the three stray companies did not yet know, was that the rest of the regiment had fought its way into the residency at Lucknow under Havelock, where the first relief column was now besieged alongside the original garrison. Wolseley marched up the Grand Trunk Road, passed through Cawnpore, where he gazed upon the scene of the infamous Bibighar atrocity, and then participated in Sir Colin Campbell's Second Relief of Lucknow, an operation which saw some of the hardest fighting undertaken by the British Army between Waterloo and the close of the century. Wolseley's company, invariably led from the front, was the first to link up with the embattled garrison, much to the chagrin of Campbell, who had intended that the honour would fall to his old Balaklava comrades in the 93rd Highlanders.³ In the spring of 1858 Wolseley joined the staff of Sir Hope Grant, for the pacification of Oudh, in which campaign he would see another half-dozen general actions.⁴ By the time the Mutiny had run its course, he had risen to brevet lieutenant colonel. Still only 26, he was the youngest officer of his rank in the service. He remained on Grant's staff for the Second China War, participating in the actions at Sin-ho, the Taku Forts, Tientsin, Pa-to-cheau and Peking.⁵ Wolseley spent the larger part of the 1860s as a staff colonel in Canada. With civil war raging south of the border, he took a long-leave and slipped through Federal territory to visit the Army of Northern Virginia. He was afforded a warm welcome and spent time in the company of Lee, Jackson and Longstreet, all of whom left a deep impression on him.⁶ When, in 1889, Wolseley wrote extensively about the Civil War for an American periodical, he would display something of a pro-Confederate bias. He heaped praise on Lee, describing him as the greatest soldier of the age and the 'most perfect man I ever met'.⁷ 'Old Pete' Longstreet had fallen out of favour, however, and was characterised by Wolseley as Lee's 'carping lieutenant', partly for his performance at Gettysburg, but primarily for having had the impertinence to criticise Lee after the war. Like Lee,

¹ Ibid, i, 240.

² Wolseley, journal entry 9 Sep. 84; see Preston (ed.), *Relief of Gordon*, 12.

³ The already legendary 'thin red line' episode of three years earlier.

⁴ For Wolseley's service in the Mutiny see *A Soldier's Life*, i, 255-392.

⁵ For his service in China; Ibid, ii, 1-87.

⁶ For his visit to the Army of Northern Virginia; Ibid, ii, 117-143.

⁷ All Wolseley's writing on the ACW was collated and published as a single volume in 1964. See James A. Rawley, (ed.), *The American Civil War: An English View; The Writings of Field Marshal Lord Wolseley*, (Charlottesville, VA, 1964). The only piece he penned contemporaneously was *A Month's Visit to the Confederate Headquarters*, published in the Jan. 1863 edition of *Blackwood's Magazine*.

‘Stonewall’ Jackson, who had not survived the war, also received high praise. Conscious, as ever, of public opinion, Wolseley had changed his tune somewhat on the subject of Lincoln, who 25 years earlier he had characterised as a dabbling politician who knew nothing of war: now he was recast as a great strategist and iron-willed man of principle. Like Longstreet, former CSA president Jefferson Davis had also run short of friends by 1889. He was similarly slated by Wolseley and dismissed as a ‘third-rate man’. The aged Davis (81) felt moved to write a riposte, entitled ‘Lord Wolseley’s Mistakes’, but the confrontation terminated with the arch-rebel’s death of only a few months later.¹

Wolseley’s rise to public renown began with his first independent command, a low-key affair of 1870, when he led the Red River Expedition through the wilds of Manitoba to Fort Garry, scattering Louis Riel’s irresolute Metis rebels in the process. Importantly it had been a waterborne expedition, in which great distances had been conquered with the aid of small river craft and local boatmen known as *voyageurs*. In the context of what was later to transpire in the Sudan, it is important to note, first, that the expedition had been little more than a thousand strong, and second, that the rebels were all but incapable of meeting the troops in a stand-up fight. Wolseley’s fame was secured by the Asante Campaign (1873-4) on the Gold Coast (Ghana). The fighting took place in a disease-ridden tropical environment and was tense, confusing and physically exacting. It drew to a close when the British entered Kumasi and put it to the torch. On his return to England, Wolseley was feted as the man of the moment. A parliamentary vote of thanks was accompanied by £25,000, a sum sufficient to secure his prosperity for life. In 1875 he was sent to South Africa as the Lieutenant Governor of Natal, tasked primarily with getting the colony’s administration into good order. With the cessation of the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-8, Wolseley was next despatched to take over Cyprus as a British possession. In the aftermath of the Isandlwana disaster of January 1879, the Duke of Cambridge saw past Lord Chelmsford’s obfuscating despatches and appointed Wolseley to supersede him as GOC South Africa. Having disregarded Wolseley’s order to await his arrival, Chelmsford terminated his uphill struggle with the Zulu by gaining a decisive victory at Ulundi. A furious Wolseley had to content himself with a hasty redeployment to the newly annexed Transvaal, where he quickly defeated Sekhukhune, paramount chief of the baPedi, who had previously driven off a succession of timorous Boer commandos.

The high-point of Wolseley’s career came when Gladstone ordered a full-scale military intervention in Egypt. Although he had only recently been appointed as Adjutant-General, Wolseley was the natural choice as commander land operations and duly handed over his Whitehall desk to a stand-in. Following a short but brilliant campaign of manoeuvre,² he routed the mutinous Egyptian military at Tel-el-Kebir and took Cairo the following day.

Always an ardent advocate of professionalism and modernisation, Wolseley had for some years been referred to by newspapermen and caricaturists as ‘our only general’. By the time the Khartoum crisis arose, he was at the height of his powers and

¹ See Rawley (ed.), *An English View*, 154 & 159-164 (on Longstreet); p. xxii, 116 and 35-6 (on Jackson); pp. xxx & 219-220 (on Lincoln); 76-7 (on Davis); pp. xxvii-xxix, 30-35 & 221-3 (on Lee).

² See Maurice, *Campaign of 1882 in Egypt*.

in his second year as Adjutant-General. There were few subjects upon which he was in complete accord with the Commander-in-Chief,¹ an office which since 1856 had been held by Field Marshal HRH George, Duke of Cambridge, a grandson of George III and a first cousin to the Queen Empress. By 1884 the Duke was 65 and more than a little set in his ways. To Wolseley he was an arch-reactionary plain and simple. Conservative he may have been but, contrary to the picture painted in Wolseley's private correspondence, the 'incompetent old crocodile'² was far from stupid. Moreover he knew the Army inside out and cared passionately for its well-being. In a curious way the bickering duo did not make an entirely ruinous combination: in an age of military transition, when the best road ahead was not always apparent, it was no bad thing to have the worst excesses of the arch-radical checked by the caution of the arch-reactionary and *vice versa*. The Duke had no choice but to respect Wolseley's talent, while the rank of Field Marshal and the Duke's royal lineage similarly demanded due deference from the Adjutant-General. There were no shouting matches in so formal an age and there were even times when they seemed to be rubbing along well enough.

Wolseley's record demonstrated that he was an innovative, thoughtful and thorough staff planner, and could be counted a safe pair of hands in command appointments. He had stepped down from the post of Adjutant-General to command in Egypt, but now, having returned to Whitehall, his career as a fighting general was ostensibly over. Yet his ambition and love of campaigning drove him to covet still more active service and personal glory. His 1862 visit to the Army of Northern Virginia had brought him into contact with some of the 'great-captains' of the age. The problem for Wolseley's ego was that while he knew, and *knew* is quite the right word for a man possessed of such bumptious self-confidence, that he too was a great-captain, he had only ever triumphed over what the likes of Grant, Von Moltke, Lee and the rest would have regarded as third-rate opposition. In the aftermath of the Second Anglo-Afghan War, Wolseley's jealously guarded pre-eminence in British military circles was threatened by the rise in the Indian service of General Fred Roberts VC. The burgeoning rivalry between the Queen Empress's greatest generals goes some way to explaining why Wolseley strove quite so hard to shift the blame for the failure of his last command onto the shoulders of others. At the strategic level the Prime Minister had lost the battle for public opinion and was all but self-selecting as the villain of the piece. As Lord Cromer, (formerly Sir Evelyn Baring), later articulated in his *Modern Egypt*, public opinion had by no means arrived at an unreasonable verdict. 'In a word the Nile expedition was sanctioned too late, and the reason why it was sanctioned too late was that Mr Gladstone would not accept simple evidence of a plain fact, which was patent to much less powerful intellects than his own.'³ Of course a question mark remains over the extent to which this necessarily takes care of what we would now term the operational-level, as Gladstone had assuredly not dictated *how* the relief of Khartoum was to be effected, and advancing along the Nile was but one of a number of military options. Indeed, over the period May-June 1884, the government had

¹ Still technically at this juncture the 'General Commanding-in-Chief'. The foreshortened title was not adopted until 1887.

² Wolseley to his wife, 11 Mar. 85; see Arthur (ed.), *Wolseley Letters*, 206.

³ Cromer, *Modern Egypt*, ii, 17.

formed the view that the Nile option ranked second, behind the Suakin-Berber caravan road: it had only changed its mind under heavy pressure, little short of insistence, from Lord Wolseley.

At the tactical level, Wolseley deflected the blame in the direction of an officer, who, had it not been for his involvement in the Sudan, would otherwise have enjoyed a relatively obscure military career. If his own judgement had been peremptory, hyper-critical perhaps, he must nonetheless have remained cognizant that there was no *bona fide* case for Wilson to answer, either in military law or in terms of public accountability. Thus there was every danger that any competently executed impartial enquiry, which delved too far into the close detail, might exonerate Wilson and arrive at damning observations on his own higher management of the campaign. He resolved, accordingly, to try and uphold his previously untarnished military reputation by indirect means.

4.2.2 Life of Wilson

Charles Wilson¹ was born at 8 Wesley Street, Princes Park, Liverpool on 14 March 1836. His childhood home was Hean Castle, near Tenby. He was educated at St David's School from the age of seven, the Collegiate Institute in Liverpool from the age of nine, and Cheltenham College from the age of 16. In June 1854 the 18 year-old Wilson was sent to hone his language skills in Bonn. He had always had an interest in joining the Army and hurried home on learning that the undermanned Royal Engineers were about to admit a special cohort of officers. He sailed through the examination and, in October 1855, was commissioned as a lieutenant and called forward for 'special-to-arm' training at Chatham. In April 1857 he was posted to an engineer company stationed at Shorncliffe. A year later he was transferred to Portsmouth, to work on the Gosport defences.²

In February 1858 Wilson was appointed to his first overseas duty. The task of the North American Boundary Commission, a joint Anglo-US body, was to determine, chart and mark the ill-defined boundary between Canada and the United States from the Rockies to the Pacific. The 21-year-old Wilson was to act as 'Secretary and Transport Officer', a post which entailed commanding a party of Royal Engineers and toiling through the wilderness with convoys of pack-mules. Wilson was employed with the mission from April 1858 to July 1862.³ On returning to England, he was posted to work on the Medway fortifications. In September 1864 he volunteered to lead an expedition tasked with surveying Jerusalem. In addition to his mapping work, he developed a fascination for the ancient sites and culture of the region. A return journey to the Middle East came in November 1865, at the behest of the Palestine Exploration Fund (PEF). Such was the quality of Wilson's survey work that when he came home, in June 1866, he was at once elected to the PEF's executive committee. His next posting was to the Ordnance Survey in Scotland. In June 1867, at the age of

¹ For a full biography see Col. Sir Charles M. Watson, *The Life of Major General Sir Charles Wilson*, (London, 1909).

² Ibid, 7-10.

³ For Wilson's service in N. America; Ibid, 13-40.

31, he married Olivia, the daughter of Colonel Adam Duffin, a retired Indian Army man. The newlyweds made their home at Blythefield, near Inverness. A little over a year later Wilson sailed from Southampton at the head of the Sinai Survey Expedition (October 1868-May 1869). Wilson might not be fighting his way around the globe like Wolseley, but nonetheless had grown accustomed to riding hard and living under canvas.¹

Between May 1869 and August 1876, the era of the Cardwell Reforms, Wilson undertook seven years of highly significant staff-work at the War Office. The Ordnance Survey had recently been hived off from the Topographical Department in New Street, Spring Gardens, leaving only the Topographical and Statistical sections in situ, of which Wilson now became the Executive Officer.² In addition to researching and printing maps of places of geo-strategic or developing interest, the department was meant to act as a fount of knowledge on foreign armies – to have an intelligence function in other words – albeit the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War served only to expose how little the British knew of their continental rivals. There had been precious little harmony in military affairs, in the period between the end of the Crimean War and the point at which Wilson joined the Topographical Department, not least because successive Secretaries of State for War had determined that the time had come to assert their primacy over the C-in-C and his headquarters at Horse Guards. Because ministers were attempting to manage an ever more complex network of imperial embroilments, the need for an effective strategic intelligence branch had become obvious to them. Thus they more readily came to appreciate the potential of a well-run Topographical Department, than did their military colleagues at Horse Guards. As a result Wilson took over an organization which was undermanned, disorganised and not terribly good at its job. Working in the department's favour was that it had established close ties with the Staff College and had established itself as an attractive career path for intelligent and energetic officers, primarily at this stage, from the engineer and artillery branches.³

If it was clear that the Topographical Department would benefit from an overhaul, it quickly became apparent that Captain Wilson was just the man for the job. An intellectually gifted new arrival, Captain Evelyn Baring RA, an officer deeply committed to modernisation and reform, would prove to be the perfect confederate. Together Wilson and Baring pressed the Secretary of State for War to expand the role and responsibilities of their office. Cardwell appointed his Under Secretary, Thomas Baring, 1st Earl of Northbrook, (a cousin to Evelyn), to explore the matter, and in due course endorsed the Northbrook Report, a document in large part authored by Wilson. Cardwell pressed ahead and, on 23 February 1873, announced in the Commons that the Topographical Department would henceforth be known as the Intelligence Branch of the War Office and would shortly have a major general at its head.⁴ On 23 May 1873 Wilson was promoted by seniority to major.¹ The following

¹ For his service in Jerusalem in Palestine; Ibid, 41-73.

² Ibid, 76-7.

³ For the foundation of the Intelligence Branch see William Beaver, *Under Every Leaf: How Britain played the Greater Game from Afghanistan to Africa*, (London, 2012).

⁴ Watson, *Life of Wilson*, 81-2.

January he supervised the relocation of the Intelligence Branch to Adair House in St James Square. He had been one of only two serving officers in the Topographical Department when he commenced his tour of duty, but was one of 17 officers, supported by 11 military clerks and 14 civil servants, when in August 1876 his tour with the Intelligence Branch came to an end. Shortly afterwards he was made a Companion of the Bath in recognition of his services.² the extent of his contribution to the development of British military intelligence is not to be underestimated. Out of office hours, he had remained heavily involved with the Palestine Exploration Fund; by the time he left London he had also been elected as a Fellow of both the Royal Geographical Society and the Royal Society.

Wilson's new post was as the Director of the Ordnance Survey in Ireland. After only two years in Dublin, he was diverted into the grey area between intelligence and diplomacy, to work on issues arising from the cessation of the Russo-Turkish War. He was first sent to be the British representative on a commission tasked with fixing the boundary between Serbia and Turkey.³ In December 1878 he departed Belgrade, to become one of a network of British consuls-general deployed across Asia Minor, where Ottoman administration had come to be regarded as both venal and inept. Brigandage and inter-ethnic violence had created an atmosphere of lawlessness across the region and in the process had blighted the lives of the rural poor. The idea was that the British consuls-general, military men all, would tender their advice to local officials and thereby strive to exert a beneficial moral influence over their districts. They were also to gather information and submit regular reports. They enjoyed no executive authority and where they were unable to make any headway were to report the local situation to the British ambassador in Constantinople, so that top-down pressure could be applied. Wilson's area was Anatolia. His four subordinate vice-consuls included Captain J. D. H. Stewart, 11th Hussars, and Lieutenant H. H. Kitchener RE, although in practice the group was so dispersed that they saw little of one another.⁴ Their mission was, 'reform of the administration, the welfare of the people, and justice and protection for all classes without distinction of race or creed.'⁵ It was a tall order for men who could never be more than counsellors and honest-brokers. In April 1879 Wilson received a brevet promotion to lieutenant colonel.⁶ Between August 1879 and January 1881, he was constantly on the move, covering vast distances on horseback, attempting always to dispense sagacity and goodwill wherever he passed. Contrary to the popular perception of him as an office man, he dined with danger on a daily basis.⁷ He was allowed two months leave in England between January and March, at which point he returned to Turkey to continue his work. His reports had been consistently thorough and perceptive and, that summer, his services were recognised with a KCMG. His substantive lieutenant colonelcy by seniority came with effect 31 December 1881.⁸

¹ *Hart's AL 1885*, i, 205.

² Watson, *Life of Wilson*, 84.

³ For the Servian [sic] Boundary Commission; *Ibid*, 94-102.

⁴ For a full list of officers who served under Wilson over the course of this tour; *Ibid*, 108.

⁵ Sir A. H. Layard to the Marquis of Salisbury, 22 Mar. 1880; quoted in Watson, *Life of Wilson*, 162.

⁶ *Hart's AL 1885*, i, 205.

⁷ For a comprehensive account of Wilson's service in Asia Minor see Watson, *Life of Wilson*, 103-199.

⁸ *Hart's AL 1885*, i, 205.

By the spring of 1882, the futility of a handful of men attempting to reform the governance of so vast a region had been recognised, and the hard-riding consuls-general were withdrawn. With Egypt in crisis and British troops ashore, Wilson was instructed to report for duty under the consul-general, Sir Edward Malet. He arrived in Alexandria on 3 September, to find that Wolseley had moved the bulk of his army to Ismailia, leaving Sir Evelyn Wood's brigade behind to keep the enemy occupied. Two days later Wood took Wilson out to visit his troops. An artillery exchange developed during the course of the day – the first occasion on which Sir Charles had been under fire.¹ A few days later he received orders from Wolseley, instructing him to report for duty in Ismailia. There was supposed to be a Turkish contingent coming to fight alongside the British and it would be Wilson's job to act as the political go-between. When Wolseley's force advanced on Tel-el-Kebir, Wilson was not permitted to accompany it, but was required to continue holding himself in readiness for the arrival of the Turks. Of course the decisive phase of the campaign was of such brief duration that they failed to arrive in time.²

The day after the occupation of Cairo, Wilson was called forward to join the army headquarters. Wolseley saw him the next day and appointed him to manage the victorious army's interaction with the Egyptian authorities. In addition to his other wide-ranging duties, he was to assume responsibility for Arabi Pasha and other senior captives. Wilson proved to be a considerate gaoler and spent the rest of the year facilitating an imposed but pragmatic British contrivance which would see his charges arraigned before an Egyptian court-martial, admit a charge of rebellion, be sentenced to death and then have their punishment commuted to banishment for life; a far more intelligent outcome than the widely anticipated hanging.³ After the trial, Sir Charles busied himself with organising the departure of the detainees for a comfortable exile in Ceylon. Prior to his departure on 27 December 1882, Arabi wrote to Wilson to express his gratitude:

I surrendered myself to the generosity and honour of the British people, feeling that I would be well treated at the hands of England. This hope has been realised. You have been to us all in the days of our captivity, kinder than a father to his children. Your constant care of us, your untiring vigilance on our behalf, your visits to us, the activity and kindness you always displayed in seeing that we should be treated with fairness and justice, have imposed upon us all a debt of gratitude which we can never sufficiently acknowledge.

We hope, sir, you will accept the heartfelt expression of our gratitude and respect for you,

Ahmed Arabi, the Egyptian⁴

¹ Wilson to his wife, 5 Sep. 1882, quoted at Watson, *Life of Wilson*, 204-6.

² Ibid, 206-7.

³ Cromer, *Modern Egypt*, i, 334-7; also Watson, *Life of Wilson*, 210-216.

⁴ Watson, *Life of Wilson*, 224.

Naturally Wilson's role as the guardian of British liberal values left him in a bad odour with the khedive and his ministers.

Some months prior to Arabi's departure, the Earl of Dufferin, formerly the ambassador in Constantinople, had become the British supremo in Cairo. He already held Wilson in high regard and, on learning that he was due to go back to the Ordnance Survey in Dublin, tentatively enquired how he felt about going to the Sudan in the role of Governor-General instead. At this point the Hicks disaster was still nine months in the future. In a letter to Lady Olivia, Sir Charles remarked that:

I hardly know what to do; the Sudan is a tempting offer, it would be great work to pacify it, and it is a country which has a great future before it. A railway will probably be commenced this year, and I believe I could do good, as well as save enough in a couple of years to provide a good education for all the children. Then, on the other hand, it is utter banishment from you and the children, and, if anything happened in Europe while I was out of the way I would feel it terribly.¹

In the end nothing came of the idea and in late-February 1883, Wilson departed as planned. His valuable service in Egypt was recognised with a brevet promotion to colonel.² Lord Dufferin left Egypt in May, while in September, Baring, no longer a soldier, took over as the consul-general. In the meantime Wilson followed the disastrous developments in the Sudan as best he could from Dublin. Much of his news came from a series of letters from his friend Gordon, who was living at that time in Jerusalem.³ It is noteworthy that when Lord Granville eventually offered Gordon's services to Baring, Wilson's name was also offered as an alternative.⁴

It was in mid-August 1884 that Wilson received a letter from Wolseley inviting him to serve as the Nile Expedition's head of intelligence.⁵ Above all else Wolseley liked to surround himself with proven, battle-hardened heroes, although he also had it in him to admire a man's intellect; that he had asked for Wilson was a tribute to his experience of intelligence work, his knowledge of the Islamic world, his understanding of the Arab mind and his industriousness. There could be no better candidate to head the Intelligence Department. The now Colonel Sir Charles Wilson KCMG, CB, RE departed London on 3 September and 16 days later reported to Wolseley in Cairo.⁶

4.3 COURSE OF THE CONTROVERSY

4.3.1 The Popular Myth

The Gordon Relief Expedition was a huge story in its day, even on the far side of the

¹ Wilson to his wife, Jan. 83; Ibid, 232.

² Hart's AL 1885, i, 205.

³ Watson, *Life of Wilson*, 243-4.

⁴ Cromer, *Modern Egypt*, i, 424.

⁵ Watson, *Life of Wilson*, 269.

⁶ Ibid, 270.

Atlantic and as far afield as the South Pacific. The death of the martyr and the heroic struggle against the clock to save him survived in the popular imagination for a great many years. It became, as the saying goes, 'a story known to every schoolboy'. The essential outline of that story was that the troops sent to save General Gordon, fought their way bravely across the desert but arrived two days 'Too Late!' Even a cursory examination of the campaign reveals that it was not quite that simple. The accusation of dawdling later levelled at Wilson could surely only hold water if the Desert Column was engaged in an all-out dash for Khartoum. While the 'story known to every schoolboy' implied that this was so, the evidence tells a different tale.

In fact ground-truth had been given a good hard spin, long before it found its way into school texts and generalist history books. These duly incorporated a gross distortion of the facts, to the effect that two days were all that separated poor Gordon from salvation. The notion is directly reflected in Wolseley's journal entry for Friday 22 May 1885 where, anticipating his return to England, he remarks, 'In what a different position I am returning home from that in which I went home in 1882. And yet I deserved success more in 1885 than in '82. Forty-eight hours too late at Khartoum has made all the difference!!.'¹ By the time Wolseley made his journal entry for Saturday 6 June 1885, he would appear to have lapsed into denial and taken to consoling himself with altered cognitions² which bore little or no resemblance to bygone reality:

My effort to relieve Gordon and the Khartoum garrison was a failure; an hour in such matters is as fatal as a month and therefore I have no right whatever to any reward. And yet such is life that I don't expect ever to do anything better in the way of plans than that formed to save Gordon, designed to make up for the valuable time dawdled away though Mr Gladstone's folly and ministerial incapacity. The conception from first to last was a most daring one, partaking of the romantic in many ways. Had it succeeded, it would have been I think the most memorable military event of the kind ever achieved. However it failed, and there is no use in crying over the few days, few hours indeed, by which it missed being a glorious success.³

At best the premise of a narrow miss constituted a misrepresentation, albeit plenty of perfectly honourable men were taken in by it. But there is a case to be made that it actually amounted to a gross distortion, a falsehood designed to deflect an unpalatable truth – that those who had condemned Wolseley's seemingly eccentric campaign plan at the outset had been right all along.

4.3.2 Wilson as Scapegoat

Wilson first became aware that he was to be the 'scapegoat', a term he himself coined that same day, on 23 March 1885, by which time the failed campaign had entered an

¹ Wolseley, journal entry 22 May 85; see Preston (ed.), *Relief of Gordon*, 217.

² See Leon Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*, (Stanford, CA, 1957).

³ Wolseley, journal entry 6 Jun. 85; see Preston (ed.), *Relief of Gordon*, 222.

operational pause.¹ Unsurprisingly, Wolseley had sought governmental direction following the arrival of the dread news from Khartoum. Gladstone had been on the political rack for some months past; now, he could not only expect to be jeered wherever he appeared in public, but had been christened 'M.O.G.' by the Tory press, (Murderer of Gordon), a parody of the acronym 'G.O.M.' (Grand Old Man), the nickname by which he had long been known in the Liberal press. Much to Wolseley's 'extreme astonishment'² his recommendations to government were accepted: he was to resume his advance on Khartoum after the hot season and 'smash' the power of the Mahdī once and for all. He was asked what additional assets he would need and what could be done from the direction of Suakin. There is little doubt that Lord Hartington was pursuing the matter in all sincerity: whether Gladstone, the arch-politician, was quite so sincere, is less certain. On April 13 1885, by which time the political firestorm over Khartoum had abated and Afghanistan had begun to dominate the foreign news, Hartington telegraphed Wolseley indicating that the government was likely to change its mind, an intimation confirmed in the Commons eight days later.³

The 'Pendjeh Incident' of 29 March 1885, which saw Russian and Afghan troops clash on the Kushk River, provided the backdrop to the sudden change of heart. With a Central Asian war-scare in full swing, it was argued that the Army could ill-afford to be distracted by on-going operations in the Sudan. In many ways it was the perfect excuse for disengagement, a policy which both Wolseley and Wilson regarded as foolish.⁴ So 23 March, the day on which Sir Charles received his rude awakening, preceded the 'Pendjeh Incident' by a week, and the cancellation of the renewed campaign by not quite a month. Oblivious to the coming U-turn, Wolseley still had his headquarters at Korti, from whence he was supervising the withdrawal of his force to summer quarters in the riparian towns of Dongola Province. His correspondence with Lady Louisa shows that he was both tired and dejected at this time. Wilson was also present at Korti and, on the day in question, was taken aback to receive a note from Wolseley requiring a written explanation of the two-day delay in setting off from Metemmeh.⁵ He wasted no time in drafting a robust and compelling report, dated the same day. It concluded, 'No one can regret the untimely death of General Gordon more than I do, or could have been more anxious to relieve him, but I do not think that any action of mine could have saved his life or averted the fall of Khartoum.'⁶ It is obvious from the tone of Wilson's report that he felt wounded by the necessity to account for his actions, a fact amply confirmed by a private letter to his wife penned later that day:

¹ Watson, *Life of Wilson*, 337.

² Wolseley to his wife, 14 Feb. 85; see Arthur (ed.), *Wolseley Letters*, 167.

³ Colvile, OH, ii, 167.

⁴ See correspondence dated 22 Apr. 85, quoted in Watson, *Life of Wilson*, 344-5.

⁵ The note appears not to have survived, although interestingly Charles Williams the war-correspondent claimed in his riposte to Wilson's Press Association interview to have seen it. Reading between the lines, Williams implies that the note was couched in terms which would be damaging to Wilson if its contents were to enter the public domain: indeed his remark is in the nature of a threat to reveal them. Ultimately Williams wrote and said a great deal that summer which he was unable to substantiate, and the note probably did not contain anything we would find revealing or surprising today.

⁶ Colvile, OH, ii, 269.

I see I am to be made the scapegoat for this failure. Even Lord Northbrook in his speech on the Vote of Censure assigns me a role which the Government distinctly refused to allow me to play. He tries to make me a political agent, whereas they insisted on making me a staff officer under Lord Wolseley. Being on active service I cannot resign, though I clearly see that the political part of the Sudan question is going to end in a fiasco just as the Zulu settlement did and, in my position, I am unable to prevent it.

You must not trouble about my not being praised by the Chief [Wolseley]; I care nothing for it, but I did care very much when I found he had discredited the account I brought of the fall of Khartum and the death of Gordon.¹

If Wilson regarded this as the beginning of his ordeal, then he was slow to catch on, as the hare had been set running in London anything up to a month earlier, albeit by somewhat irregular means.

Wolseley was a devoted husband and knew Lady Louisa's foibles well (just as she knew his). In a letter written in the immediate aftermath of the fall of Khartoum, he confided to her that he could barely stand to be in Sir Charles Wilson's presence.² He knew of course that she was active in high society and frequently drew on his letters to gossip about events at the front in the best London drawing rooms.³ Indeed, three weeks earlier she had remarked in one of her letters that ever since the news of the fighting in the Bayūda had broken, their Hill Street home had been subject to tea-time invasions by 'Camel Corps mammas',⁴ a metaphor which one would imagine embraced not only officers' mothers, but wives and fiancées too. Many of these ladies came from the best-connected families in the land and had nothing much to do but 'socialise', if not in Hill Street every day, then somewhere equally as fashionable on all the other days of the week. So if Lady Wolseley was as professional a gossip as her letters suggest, the fact that her husband held Wilson to blame for Gordon's death must have been spreading like a contagion through London society within days of her receiving the offending letter.

By now Sir Gerald Graham's Second Suakin Campaign was underway in the Red Sea Littoral: the Battle of Hashin was fought on 20 March, to be followed two days later by the Battle of Tofrek. With his campaign on the Nile stalled for a few months, Wolseley decided the time had come to visit Graham and set out for Cairo on 30 March.⁵ He did nothing with Wilson's report until 13 April, by which time he had gained the Egyptian capital. At this point he composed a short covering note and despatched the two documents for the attention of the Secretary of State for War:

¹ Wilson to his wife, 23 Mar. 85, quoted in Watson, *Life of Wilson*, 341-2.

² Wolseley to his wife, 22 Feb. 85; see Arthur (ed.), *Wolseley Letters*, 173-4.

³ See for example Lady Wolseley to her husband, 9 Feb. 85; see Arthur (ed.), *Wolseley Letters*, 183.

⁴ Lady Wolseley to her husband, 30 Jan. 85; see Arthur (ed.), *Wolseley Letters*, 179-80.

⁵ Colvile, OH, ii, 166.

Cairo,
13th April, 1885

My Lord,

I have the honour to forward a letter from Colonel Sir C. Wilson, R.E., giving the reasons for the delay in the departure of the steamers from Gubat.

I do not propose to add any remarks of my own to this letter. The reasons given by Sir Charles Wilson must speak for themselves.

*I have, etc,
Wolseley,
General*

Even as Wolseley was sat at his desk penning these words, Hartington was sat at his, drafting the telegram heralding the coming U-turn, news which would banish any aspiration Wolseley might still be harbouring of a redeeming victory to come. It was the inclusion of one little word in the last line of Wolseley's note, the word *must*, which sets the tone of the document and conveys its connotation; dispense with it, and the meaning would otherwise be supportive. This was no chance grammatical ambiguity. The connotation was subtly done, but the inference was clear. Because it was an official report, Wilson's submission was published in a Blue Book and entered the public domain on 20 May 1885.¹ The following day, his justification of his actions received nationwide press coverage.²

Wolseley's journal entry of 17 March is significant in two regards. First, it reflects the anxiety he was feeling, over the impact of the failed expedition on his reputation. Secondly, it shows that the events of 23 March had been preceded by an earlier attempt to utilise official despatches to castigate Wilson.

A telegram [has arrived] from Hartington saying my despatch in which I describe Wilson's proceedings when en route from Goubat [sic] to Khartoum and back casts a slur upon Sir C. Wilson & that he cannot publish it until Wilson has had a chance of rebutting the slur. The fact is, I pass no comment whatever upon Wilson, but my despatch shows up the Govt. very strongly & the Cabinet does not therefore want it published. I have replied, I did not see how despatch blamed Wilson & that I wished it published in justice to myself & to those under my command. Several of my recent despatches will be disagreeable reading to Govt. and I must have them published in vindication of my reputation as a General and of this Army the men of which have done all that men could do to carry out my plans. I foresee some trouble with Hartington on this score.³

¹ Egypt No. 13/1885, 31.

² See for example, as a random sample at national and local level, the 21 May 85 editions of the *Morning Post*, *London Evening Standard* and *Sheffield Independent*.

³ Preston (ed.), *Relief of Gordon*, 170.

In all likelihood it was this exchange with Hartington which precipitated Wolseley's demand of only six days later that Wilson formally account for his actions. Notwithstanding his repudiation of Hartington's objection, there can be little room to doubt that the Secretary of State was sincerely motivated and referring, if not to outright condemnation, then at least to obliquely critical inferences.

4.3.3 Wolseley's Informants

It would be difficult for anyone to read Wolseley's campaign journal and come away from the experience filled with admiration for him. Certainly Preston found him objectionable and there can be no denying that there are an uncomfortable number of entries where his vanity and and arrogance almost leap from the page. While these had not always been such marked propensities, they are by no means absent from his more restrained Asante journal of a decade earlier.¹ The frankness with which he writes does have a great many historical uses, however. In this instance we are readily able to trace the officers who contributed to his burgeoning hostility to Wilson. One of the culprits was Wilson's namesake, Lieutenant Colonel Mildmay Willson of GCR. In writing-up his journal on Wednesday 11 March, Wolseley worked himself up into a scathing tirade:

Mildmay Wilson [sic] of the Scots Guards dined with me, and as I know him to be a good sensible man with plenty of nerve and pluck, I gently drew him out on the subject of the delay in sending the steamers to Khartoum. It seems there were about four hours lost in moving the square forward to the river. The camels were laden several times & every preparation made for marching upon the Nile, but as often were counter-orders issued.

Kasm el Moose [sic] with 4 steamers arrived at Goubat about 9.00 a.m. on 21st Jany. & two steamers might have started that afternoon for Khartoum: instead of doing so they did not start until 8.00 a.m. on the 24th Janry. and then only went a few miles (about 13) when they halted for the night to take in wood although they had plenty on board.

Sir Charles Wilson is clearly responsible for all those delays, but poor devil he had lost any nerve he ever possessed: Abu Klea did for him in that respect: he must never again be employed on active service: the Irish [Ordnance] Survey is better suited to men of his mettle. It is too dreadful to think of the fearful consequences that have resulted from his unfitness. He could have reached Khartoum quite easily on the 25th Janry.² & had he done so, Gordon would still – in all human probability – be still alive.

Great God, it is too dreadful to dwell upon the hairbreadth by which we failed to save Gordon and Khartoum. I still think if Stewart had not been wounded, we should have saved Khartoum. Is it then to be wondered at that I hate the sight of Sir C. Wilson? I have asked that he may be recalled as wanted for his Survey, and when he goes, I hope I may never see him again. He is one of

¹ See Beckett, *Wolseley and Ashanti*.

² As will be explored later this assertion is a key issue.

*those nervous, weak, unlucky creatures that I hate having near me on active service; yet he is clever.*¹

Wolseley had received the news of the fall of Khartoum, nine days after the fact, on Wednesday 4 February. He had had 37 days to come to terms with the failure of his campaign, before he made the remarks quoted above.

The inference is that Mildmay Willson was asked leading questions, so it is by no means impossible that he inadvertently reinforced Wolseley's prejudices. The same cannot be said of Captain Charles Berkeley 'Bloody-Minded' Pigott, who was the first officer to reach Wolseley's headquarters in the aftermath of Abu Kru. Pigott was a fearless blood-and-thunder merchant of the sort greatly admired by Wolseley.² It was to this characteristic, rather than to any propensity to stubbornness, that his nickname referred. Indeed, he was often referred to, even less endearingly, as 'Bloody Pigott'.³ He had arrived at Korti at 3.00 *am* on Wednesday 28 January, at which point he was interviewed by the anxious army commander, who had received no news of the Desert Column for more than a week.⁴ It follows that any adverse comment recorded in Wolseley's journal that day is entirely grounded in Pigott's opinions:

*Wilson has proved a great failure as a soldier: he succeeded to command when Stewart was wounded. On 21st instant Wilson made a foolish reconnaissance of Matammeh moving his men about in square and then fell back, a line of conduct that of course has encouraged enemy [sic]. During this silly operation four steamers arrived from up river, landed men and guns to cooperate in attack on village...*⁵

Recorded in these two journal entries, then, is the substance of the case against Wilson. He was nervous, weak, vacillating and afraid. He was unfit to command; his operations were so 'foolish' and 'silly' that they encouraged the enemy; he was a 'great failure'; he lost his nerve at Abu Klea; he was responsible for a four-hour delay in advancing at Abu Kru; he could easily have started for Khartoum on the afternoon of 21 January; it was his fault and his alone that the expedition had failed. True, part-true or calumny?

4.3.4 The Accusations Go Public

In May 1885 *The Fortnightly Review* published an article entitled *How We Lost Gordon*. The author was Charles Williams, a well-established war-correspondent who had covered the Franco-Prussian War, the Russo-Turkish War and the Second Anglo-Afghan War. At the time of the Egyptian intervention he had been the editor of the *Evening*

¹ Wolseley, journal entry 11 Mar. 85; see Preston (ed.), *Relief of Gordon*, 164.

² See for example Beresford, *Memoirs*, i, 265.

³ See Lt. Thomas Snow, *Mounted Infantry in the Desert Campaign 84-5*, (MS account held by NAM).

⁴ Wolseley, journal entry 28 Jan. 85; see Preston (ed.), *Relief of Gordon*, 127.

⁵ *Ibid*, 128.

News.¹ *How We Lost Gordon* was stridently hostile to Wilson: after criticising his character, military pedigree and lack of combat experience, Williams went on to insist that had he pushed on from Metemmeh with all possible speed, Gordon would undoubtedly have been saved. In a remarkable personal attack sustained over more than 6,000 words, Williams asserted that Wilson had lost his nerve and turned the steamers far too early to be certain of Gordon's fate: this particular piece of 'intelligence' he attributed to the Royal Navy bluejackets and members of the 20-man detachment of 1st Royal Sussex which had been aboard the steamers. Williams then proceeded to 'prove' his point by observing that no casualties had been incurred aboard the steamers, a statement which whilst it was true of the British personnel did not apply to the loyalist Sudanese. Curiously *How We Lost Gordon* directly contradicted a number of earlier generous observations on Wilson's conduct proffered in Williams's *Daily Chronicle* coverage of Abu Kru.²

A number of other newspapers, editorially disposed to vindicate Gladstone but ill-placed to judge the truth of the matter, took up Williams's refrain. At Korti, meanwhile, a telegram from home advised Wilson that the attack in the *Fortnightly Review* had taken place,³ although it remains unclear whether he saw the full text of the article before returning home. A good many newspapers chose to spring to Wilson's defence.⁴ The 20 May publication of the Parliamentary Blue Book enclosing both Wilson's explanation of 23 March and Wolseley's icy covering note followed hard on the heels of the May edition of the *Fortnightly Review*, serving to fuel the fire kindled by Williams. The 21 May edition of the *Sheffield and Rotherham Independent* exemplifies just how much heat the affair generated that summer:

*Lord Wolseley's curt refusal to make any comment upon the report, and his dry remark that Sir Charles Wilson's reasons must speak for themselves admit, obviously, of two diametrically opposite interpretations. But whether this be intended as praise or censure, we see no reason why others should display the same reticence, and, for our own part, we are bound to say that Colonel Wilson's apology [sic - it was hardly that] is altogether unsatisfactory, and signally fails to remove the grievous belief that when Gordon was still within reach of prompt succour, the golden opportunity of relieving him was lost through inconceivable dawdling, and through a want of push so deplorable as to be little short of criminal.*⁵

According to Watson, his biographer, Sir Charles received a great many letters of support from friends and acquaintances over the next few weeks, 'expressing in strong

¹ *New York Times*, 10 Aug. 87, (which carries an article, incorporating biographical notes, heralding an imminent lecture tour by Williams).

² See for example his *Daily Chronicle* report, quoted in *The Citizen*, 31 Jan. 85. Williams's observations will be cited in a later chapter.

³ Wilson's interview of 22 Jun. 85. with a Press Association representative; see the *London Daily News*, Thu. 23 Jun. 85.

⁴ Watson, *Life of Wilson*, 348-9. See for example *The Hampshire Advertiser*, Sat. 30 May 85, which rounded on Williams.

⁵ *Sheffield and Rotherham Independent*, 21 May 85.

language' how angry they were at the unfounded accusations which had been levelled against him.¹ On the same day that the editor of the *Sheffield and Rotherham Independent* ran amok with Wilson's reputation, the London based *Standard* took a more perceptive tack, condemning the very fact that the government had seen fit to publish Wilson's defence of his actions.

Is it intended that Sir C. Wilson is to be tried before the bar of public opinion, and acquitted or condemned, not only informally but without evidence taken on either side? And is military discipline to act or hold its hand, moved by a mere gust of popular displeasure or checked by popular good nature, like the victorious gladiator of an old Roman Amphitheatre? The whole proceeding appears to us eminently unsatisfactory. We should be sorry to accept the bait thrown to the public [a perceptive remark which hints at Wolseley's stratagem] and condemn or acquit an officer who has not even been charged by the authorities with any offence. But this we may say – that the day or two lost or saved at the end of a long operation, which lingered over several months, cannot, and must not, be allowed to make us forget the far longer delays and hesitations which preceded the expedition.²

Free at last to come home, Wilson embarked at Alexandria for Venice. While he was journeying across the Continent, Gladstone's administration was in the process of collapse and duly fell on 9 June. By the time he landed in England a Conservative government had taken office, with Lord Salisbury as Prime Minister and W. H. Smith as Secretary of State for War. The new government immediately contemplated whether it should reverse its forerunner's decision to disengage from the Sudan. Wilson was summoned to give his view of the matter to Smith.³ Eventually the cabinet was forced to conclude that the evacuation of Dongola had gone too far and that it had no choice but to persist with a strategy of withdrawal. Smith telegraphed Wolseley confirming this on 2 July 1885.⁴ It was at around this period, most likely on 20 June, that Muḥammad Aḥmad died, probably of typhus,⁵ to be succeeded by the Khalīfa 'Abd Allāhi.

4.3.5 Wilson Fights Back

The day after Wilson's return General Sir Lintorn Simmons, the Governor of Malta, felt moved to write a forcefully expressed letter of support.

Of course if possible a scapegoat must be found. I have just read your report of March 23rd and Lord Wolseley's letter forwarding it to the Secretary of State.

¹ Watson, *Life of Wilson*, 349.

² *The Standard*, 21 May 85.

³ Watson, *Life of Wilson*, 354.

⁴ Colvile, OH, ii, 177.

⁵ There was a story current at the time that he had been poisoned by one of his numerous wives and concubines; see Wingate, *Mahdism*, 228.

*No doubt that letter may be read in two ways. "Your reasons which speak for themselves" may be satisfactory or the reverse. But there can be no doubt that the tone of that letter is contemptuous, and intended to let the blame of failure rest on you.*¹

Simmons concluded his observations with, 'I write this from deep conviction and in the firm belief that the dastardly act of trying to make you the scapegoat will, ere long, meet the reward and exposure it deserves.'

On Monday 22 June Wilson gave an interview to a sympathetic representative of the Press Association,² in which he remarked of Williams's criticisms, 'There is hardly one correct statement in the whole article.'³ There then followed a twelve-point repudiation of Williams's allegations, which were presented in a question and answer format in the *London Daily News* and certain provincial papers the following day.⁴ On Tuesday, Williams sent a strongly worded telegram to the Press Association in which he stood by his remarks and repudiated everything Wilson had said. The text of his telegram was carried in newspapers across the country the next day.⁵

He began by disputing the point on the Nile at which Wilson had ordered the steamers put about, first noting that Lieutenant Stuart-Wortley had told him that they had been, 'near the south end of Tuti Island,' a remark which, to those familiar with the geography, does no harm whatever to Wilson's cause. Williams next quoted an article carried in the *Daily News* the previous day. Its author was Colonel (Retd.) the Hon. John Colborne, who, since his service under Hicks, had returned to the Sudan as a war-correspondent, in which capacity he had accompanied the River Column forward of Korti. Wolseley's journal entry for 10 January observes that he was representing, 'some German Illustrated Paper',⁶ although in fact he also seems to have been in the employ of the *Daily News*.⁷ Colborne's article of 22 June reprised a lengthy account by a Greek, who had survived the fall of Khartoum, which Williams cited as follows:

The Greek, whose statement has been sent home by Colonel Colborne from Dongola to the Daily News, says – 'The steamers arrived at Halfiah [sic] I saw them about one mile and a half from Khartoum: they turned back directly.' How about reaching the junction of the Blue and the White Niles now?

In fact Halfaiya was more than seven miles from the confluence of the Niles, so that the (estimated) distance at which the witness saw the steamers is a *non sequitur*

¹ Watson, *Life of Wilson*, 350-1.

² Whose identity I have been unable to trace.

³ See the *London Daily News*, Thu. 23 Jun. 85.

⁴ See for example the *Liverpool Mercury* of that date.

⁵ See for example the *Edinburgh Evening News*, *Sheffield & Rotherham Independent*, *Liverpool Mercury*, and *Manchester Evening News*, all Wed. 24 Jun. 85, and the *Aberdeen Journal* of the following day.

⁶ Wolseley, journal entry 10 Jan. 84; see Preston (ed.), *Relief of Gordon*, 113.

⁷ The paper certainly claimed him as its own special correspondent when it carried his coverage of the Battle of Kirbikān.



Map 5: Where Wilson turned

Just how little Charles Williams understood of the geography at Khartoum is demonstrated here. Clearly the steamers were nowhere near the south end of Tuti Island, no matter what Stuart-Wortley might have said. Nor were they anywhere near Halfaiya – so far from the confluence as to be omitted from this map. It was perfectly possible for them to have passed the northernmost junction of the rivers.

in relation to their arrival at (or from the direction of) Halfaiya.¹ Williams evidently had a feeble grasp on what the confluence of the Niles looked like; failing to appreciate that in order for there to be a very large island at the merger of two rivers there must perforce be two river junctions. He was also directly disingenuous in punctuating the Greek's statement with a full stop. In reality the witness narrative continued, 'They turned back directly; but I say this – if they had come on then every man would have been destroyed.'² Evidently not a man to back down when pressed, Williams continued his selective rejoinder in a remarkably arrogant vein:

If the presence of our English officers, a detachment of the Royal Sussex, and a number of black troops, with a quantity of grain aboard the steamers, would not in effect have been a relief of Khartoum, words seem to me have lost their meaning.

....Under the tenth head Sir C. Wilson states that he was not induced by anybody to leave the zariba and march to the Nile on the 19th of January. Perhaps he will deny that he was told by an officer that if he would not form the camp on the Nile that officer would do it on his own responsibility.

....Perhaps if he desires to continue the controversy he will make public the terms of the correspondence from Lord Wolseley to which his paper of the 23rd of March was an answer. I have said Sir C. Wilson disobeyed written orders. I say so again. To disobey orders about which there could be no mistake used to be a high military offence. I suppose it is not now.³

The matter of Wilson's orders will be addressed in Chapter 6.

On the Saturday of that same week, Williams came under heavy fire in a *Saturday Review* article entitled *The War-Correspondent*:

There is no need to enter here on the merits of the dispute between Sir Charles Wilson and Mr. Williams: neither would it be just in the absence of information which will not easily be got at in our time. What we have to deal with here is the illustration the quarrel affords of the evils arising out of the presence of war-correspondents with our armies. One the one side is the servant of a newspaper – a private speculation, which exists to sell – who rushes into print to accuse an officer of gross negligence. On the other hand is an English general [sic], who has allowed himself to be provoked into a wordy war, and has condescended to give and take the lie by merely entering into the dispute. Sir Charles has proved how low the standard of professional pride in the army has sunk. At an earlier period it would have been a matter of course to a gentleman

¹ The accounts of Wilson, Gascoigne, Trafford and Stuart-Wortley are unanimously agreed that they fought their way past Halfaiya, where there were a number of guns, and engaged enemy positions on Tuti Island and Omdurman. The *Bordein* even hailed enemy riflemen on Tuti Island from a distance of 80 yards in the mistaken belief that they were members of the garrison.

² *Guernsey Star*, Thu 28 Jun. 85, citing Colborne's 22 Jun. article for the *Daily News*.

³ Quoted in the *Liverpool Mercury*, Wed. 24. Jun. 85.

in his position that he had no answer to give except to his official chiefs.¹ Mr. Williams cannot be said to have offended against professional etiquette. It was his business to produce an effect –the more striking the better. He has succeeded. We think it will, however, prove that one of the means he has selected to attain this effect should not be forgotten. It throws a useful light on a war-correspondents' work in the army. On his own showing, then, Mr. Williams has accused Sir Charles Wilson of gross misconduct chiefly on the authority of private soldiers. He has gone to the ranks in search of ill-natured and partially mutinous gossip about a commander...it is unnecessary to explain that the existence of people engaged in this sort of intrigue in a camp is destructive of all discipline...The lesson will be learned if the next of the tribe who is caught at this trick is sent back to the base of operations tied by the wrists to the tail of an ammunition wagon.²

Williams dined that same Saturday with fellow freemasons of the 'Gallery Lodge'. After dinner the 'worshipful master', Mr W. M. Duckworth, proposed a toast to brother Williams, happily safely returned from the Sudan. Williams was then invited to speak. There was only limited reporting of his speech, but what little coverage exists shows that Williams claimed that those who knew him well could not possibly apprehend that he had intended to make a personal attack on Sir Charles Wilson; that the 'sole purpose' of his article was to convey the lesson that officers who had spent the bulk of their careers in diplomatic appointments should on no account be permitted to succeed to a field command. Williams then proceeded to repeat a point he had made in the *Fortnightly Review*, by singling out the Guards and Royal Engineers as corps where officers of that ilk were to be found in abundance. This, then, was the gist of the speech as reported the following Monday.³ Assuming that it constitutes a reasonably accurate précis, Williams plainly misrepresented what he had written in March, as there is no question but that his article incorporated a sustained and vicious personal attack on Wilson.

The following weekend, on Saturday 4 July, Williams went to the Bow Street Police Court to initiate libel proceedings against Alexander James Beresford Hope MP, the proprietor of the *Saturday Review*.⁴ Cleverly he argued that *The War-correspondent* inferred that he had committed a criminal offence in military law, by eliciting insubordinate remarks from the troops in respect of a superior. The case would not come to court until late-October 1886.

It can be no coincidence that Captain Fred Gascoigne's account, *To Within a Mile of Khartoum*, appeared in the July edition of *The Nineteenth Century*, suggesting that it was written in response to Williams's attack on Wilson. Gascoigne would no doubt have felt slighted by association. Although his article is in no sense a direct

¹ A not altogether fair observation as Wilson was only too keenly aware that in this instance his chief was doing his best to set him up as a scapegoat.

² Cited in the *Birmingham Daily Post*'s coverage of the libel case, Thu. 28 Oct. 86.

³ The coverage was identified through the medium of the Mon. 29 Jun. 85 edition of the *Edinburgh Evening News*, which in all likelihood would have been repeating an article carried by one of the London papers the same day.

⁴ *Edinburgh Evening News*, Mon. 6 Jul. 85.

riposte to Williams and makes no mention of controversy, it incorporates three eye-catching elements. One was its title which of itself made a powerful point; the second was a compelling list of reasons why Wilson and Gascoigne had concluded that Khartoum had fallen; the third was the fact that the Egyptian captain had stopped the *Bordein's* engines at one point, insisting that it was obvious that Khartoum was in the hands of the enemy, only for Wilson to order the vessel forward again – hardly the act of a man who lacked 'nerve' as Williams had intimated.

Wilson, meanwhile, was due to return to Dublin, but was visited by many friends prior to his departure. Amongst them was General Sir Edward Hamley, by now an established enemy of Wolseley, who was instrumental in persuading Wilson to publish his campaign journal.¹ On top of the misrepresentations appearing in print, there was the cruel gossip of the junior and middle-ranking officers to contend with, many of whom were blue-bloods and carried considerable sway in the smart London drawing rooms in which they were now being feted. Their experiences had been genuinely harrowing and they were doubtless frustrated that their endeavours had come to naught. Many of them had lost close friends. It was the carping criticism from this quarter which set the seal on Wilson rushing *From Korti to Khartum* into print. In truth there has to be a question-mark over the extent to which effective 'passage of information' had been maintained within the increasingly demoralised Desert Column. Had the junior and middle-ranking officers ever really understood what was going on above them? Having been rescued by Beresford, Wilson had returned from the river dash late in the day on Wednesday 4 February, exhausted, despondent and with a good deal of sleep to catch up on. He was obliged by his written orders to hasten back to Korti to make his report, and departed at 1.30 *am* on Friday. Thus, he is unlikely to have had the opportunity to engage meaningfully with the junior and middle-ranking officers, either to talk about what had gone at the confluence of the Niles, or to contextualise events at Abu Kru and Metemmeh. Here, then, is another key point which will need to be addressed; what *had* happened in those two actions and what might Wilson have said to the likes of Marling and Dundonald had he been made aware of the misapprehensions they were to carry into their later lives?

Prior to departing for Dublin, Wilson was received cordially by both Lord Hartington, now out of office, and by the altogether more immovable Duke of Cambridge. Both offered their compliments on so gallant an attempt to gain Khartoum. The Duke, indeed, had already written to Wilson in the Sudan, expressing his approbation of the way in which he had handled his command. After a busy fortnight in London, Wilson reached Ireland on 1 July to find that he had only narrowly beaten a summons to Buckingham Palace. He hastened back to London, to be presented to the Queen on 3 July. Victoria seems to have been enthralled by his account of the river dash and the following day sent for his photograph, so that it could be included in her military albums, (now archived at Windsor Castle).² According to Watson, to whom Lady Olivia gave full access to her late husband's private papers, Wilson wrote to the (acting) Adjutant-General in the summer of 1885 to press for a public enquiry. He received a reply which stated that the C-in-C was perfectly satisfied

¹ Watson, *Life of Wilson*, 354.

² Watson, *Life of Wilson*, 356-7.

with everything he had done and which went on to 'request' that he did not press the matter further.¹ On 12 August 1885, a little over a year after he had been permitted to fire the starting-gun on the race for Khartoum, Hartington seconded a parliamentary vote of thanks to the servicemen who had gone up the Nile. In his speech he went to great pains to emphasise that Wilson had performed gallantly and warranted none of the criticism which had been lately and unjustly levelled at him.² In November the Queen invested Wilson with a KCB, which really ought to have drawn a line under the matter.

4.3.6 Williams v Beresford Hope

Williams v Beresford Hope was tried before the Lord Chief Justice on Thursday 28 October 1886.³ While Beresford Hope had engaged the Attorney General as his defence counsel, Charles Williams elected to press his case in person. His contention was that any notion that he had suborned the troops into making disloyal remarks about an officer not only implied the commission of a military crime, but also besmirched his good standing as a journalist. He set the price of his anguish at £2,000. It was always inevitable that, at some point in the proceedings, the Lord Chief Justice would be obliged to remind the court that Sir Charles Wilson was not on trial, and that the issue was whether Williams had been libelled by the *Saturday Review* or not. A reminder to that effect having been dispensed, Williams proceeded to argue that he had been obliged to talk with the rank and file about the events at the confluence of the Niles because Stuart-Wortley had been far too busy writing a despatch for the attention of Lord Wolseley to talk to him.⁴ This, then, was a particular reference to 1 February, the date on which Stuart-Wortley had returned to Gubat in a rowing boat to break the news that Khartoum had fallen, both steamers had since foundered and Wilson and his command were now stranded on Mernat Island.

If the Attorney-General had taken the trouble to read *From Korti to Khartum* he might have been able to sway the jury by pointing out that there were no navy bluejackets, (specifically referred to in Williams's article), with Stuart-Wortley that day, but only four members of the Royal Sussex and eight Sudanese. In order to speak to the three sailors who had been aboard the steamers, Williams would have had to wait until Wilson's return on 4 February, when he would in any case have had the opportunity to lay his questions before a commissioned cast consisting of Wilson himself, Gascoigne, Trafford and Stuart-Wortley. The Attorney-General might also usefully have pointed out that William's article was dated 'Korti, 9 March', fully five weeks after the events at issue. He might further have helped his client's cause by pointing out that Khartoum lay on the south bank of the Blue Nile, which is to say 'around the corner' from the general line of the White Nile, and then proceeding to enquire quite how Williams imagined that naval artificers, in their enclosed engine rooms, or infantrymen volley-firing with a black-powder round, from narrow firing

¹ Ibid, 356.

² Ibid, 357.

³ See the *Leeds Mercury*, Thu. 28 Oct. 85.

⁴ See the *London Gazette*, 10 Mar. 85, 1026-8.

ports at main-deck level, at a right angle to the direction of travel, could possibly have been in a position to judge what Wilson and Gascoigne had been able to see, dead ahead, from the elevated gun-turret atop the paddle boxes, with the aid of their binoculars. While the Attorney-General had failed to line up any witnesses, Williams had the Earl of Airlie on hand. Airlie testified that he could recall Stuart-Wortley writing his despatch; that relations between the headquarters staff and the war-correspondents had been good – which he added they would not have been had any of them been in the habit of suborning the troops; and that there had been no suggestion that Williams was given to behaving improperly. The jury duly found for the prosecution and awarded Williams £300 in damages.¹

4.3.7 Publication of the Official History

From Korti to Khartum was published in January 1886 and proved a runaway best-seller. Wilson covered much the same ground as had been addressed by his 23 March report to Wolseley.² He allowed the narrative to speak for itself and made no substantive reference to the controversy of the summer months. The 23 March report, already included in a Parliamentary Blue Book, reared its head again in November 1889, when the Intelligence Branch of the War Office finally released the long-delayed official history. In the final version of Colville's work the report was given its own appendix and cited in full. The subject heading was no more boldly emphasised than any other, but it was in block letters and ran, 'Sir C. Wilson's Explanation of Delay at Gubat.' And there sitting above it, where covering notes always sit, was Wolseley's icy note of 13 April: 'The reasons given by Sir Charles Wilson *must* speak for themselves.' Thus was Wolseley's disdain for Wilson permanently enshrined in the official record.³

4.3.8 Forbes Attacks Wolseley

Archibald Forbes had not been in the Sudan, but had provided a military commentary in the London papers while the campaign was in progress. He had been obliged by his remoteness from the proceedings to be reasonably cautious, although it was clear that he was to be counted amongst those who had doubted the wisdom of Wolseley's plan from the outset. Forbes had used 1891 to sift through the Official History, until he felt sufficiently at home with the facts to launch a blistering attack on Wolseley's management of the campaign. *The Failure of the Nile Expedition* was carried in the January 1892 edition of *The Contemporary Review* and did not pull any punches:

The whole business was one of amazing ineptitude, of strange miscalculations, of abortive fads, of waste of valuable time, of attempted combinations which, devised in ignorance of conditions, were never within measurable proximity of consummation, of orders issued only to be changed and positions indicated only

¹ See the *Leeds Mercury* and the *Birmingham Daily Post* (amongst others), dated Thu. 28 Oct. 86, where the case was well reported.

² See Wilson, *Korti to Khartum*, 112-5.

³ See Colville, OH, i, 267-9.

to be altered, of lost opportunities, wrecked transport, and squandered supplies.¹

4.3.9 Thomas Heazle Parke

The last substantive attack made in Wilson's lifetime emanated from one of the Desert Column's medical officers, Surgeon Thomas Parke, who became a well-known figure when he accompanied H. M. Stanley on the Emin Pasha Relief Expedition. In May 1892, when Parke had either left or was about to leave the service to work for Stanley, he penned a piece in *The Nineteenth Century* entitled *How General Gordon was Really Lost*. Parke arbitrarily dismissed any notion that Gladstone or Wolseley were in any way to blame, asserting instead that, 'the indisputable fact remains that our force arrived at Metemmeh and was actually met there – as if by intervention of Providence – by Gordon's steamers, within such a very short distance of the beleaguered city, five whole days before the latter yielded to the enemy.'² If Parke had read *From Korti to Khartum* or had any sort of grasp of the campaign plan, he gave no sign of it. Critical his article may have been; compellingly well-argued it was not. The apparently curious timing of Parke's contribution to the debate can be accounted for by the fact that Forbes had entered the lists only four months earlier, triggering a minor stir in the press in which Parke evidently felt the need to involve himself. Wilson did not respond to Parke, although his friend Watson did write a related piece for the next edition of the RE Journal.

4.3.10 Post-mortem

The old controversy was reinvigorated well after Wilson's death, when some of the gossiping junior officers of the 1880s published their memoirs in the early decades of the new century. We saw in Chapter 2 how Dundonald and Marling in particular, both offered disparaging comments on Wilson's performance and temperament.

We have seen that in the mid-1960s Adrian Preston was responsible for unearthing Wolseley's campaign journal. This was a major find without which Wolseley's harshest criticisms of his contemporaries might simply have turned to dust. As it is they have been revived and proliferated within the historical record, requiring that their veracity be determined. In a sense, Wolseley attacked Wilson's reputation far more cruelly from beyond the grave than he was ever able to get away with in life. Thus has the controversy of 1885 lived on.

4.4 LEAD INTO CHAPTER 5

The next chapter will describe how Wolseley went about the process known today as Campaign Design. The doctrinal glossary offers a definition derived from JDP 5-00. ADP

¹ Archibald Forbes, *The Failure of the Nile Campaign*, *The Contemporary Review*, Jan. 1892 edition, partially quoted in the *Leicester Chronicle*, Sat. 9 Jun, 1892.

² *The Nineteenth Century*, May 1892 edition, 794.

Operations also reflects on the subject and this will be a useful juncture at which to reprise quite what the process entails:

*Campaign design (analyse and plan) is used to frame the problem and then to develop and refine a commander's operational ideas – his vision of how he sees the campaign unfolding – to provide detailed and actionable plans. Campaign design, through review and refinement, should be continuous because the situation will change, in response to actions, reactions and the unavoidable consequences of chance and friction.*¹

Chapter 5 will also reflect how the campaign came to be vested in the personage of the Adjutant-General.

¹ ADP *Operations*, Ch. 7, para. 0712, 7-6.

Chapter 5

THE CAMPAIGN DESIGN PROCESS

5.1 WOLSELEY'S CAMPAIGN ESTIMATE OF APRIL 1884

Modern UK doctrine defines an estimate as, '...a logical process of reasoning by which a commander, faced with an ill-structured problem, arrives at a decision for a Course of Action (CoA), to be taken in order to achieve his mission.'¹ Put simply, it is framing a problem and then sifting through a range of options to identify which of them can be considered best-suited to the resolution of the problem. Today it is considered that the estimate process will proceed through six straightforward stages as follows:

- Step 1 – Understand the Operating Environment
- Step 2 – Understand the Problem
- Step 3 – Formulate Potential CoAs
- Step 4 – Develop and Validate CoAs
- Step 5 – Evaluate CoAs
- Step 6 – Commander's Decision²

Of note is that today's campaign planning doctrine also talks of the estimate process developing what it terms the 'Commander's Big Idea'. Wolseley's version of the big idea was the use of small boats and riverine lines of communication to overcome issues of logistic sustainability, not the least of which was the provision of water in a desert environment.

Wolseley always knew that the weight of public opinion would eventually swing against the government and started working on options, for an expedition he regarded as inevitable, as early as the first week of April. As the Adjutant-General, it would not be his campaign; that was a responsibility which would fall to Lieutenant General Sir Frederick Stephenson as GOC Cairo. But London would have to fire the starting-gun and, as the principal military adviser to the Secretary of State for War, it would be Wolseley who would have to do the early brainstorming. He outlined his initial thoughts in a lengthy memorandum to Hartington dated 8 April 1884.³ With Berber still in government hands at that juncture, Wolseley began by nominating Shendy, 100 miles further south, as the first point at which resistance could be anticipated. The immediate object should be to concentrate a force of 6,500 men there.⁴ The memo

¹ JDP 5-00, *Campaign Planning*, Ch. 2, para. 245, p. 2-21.

² For a graphic representation of the process see Ibid Ch. 2, p. 2-24. See also pp. 2-28/2-38 for a detailed description of what each step entails.

³ See Colville, OH, i, 26-30.

⁴ In today's terminology this would represent a 'Decisive Condition' or in plain English, an intermediate goal.

then went on to consider the route by which the force should move to Shendy. There were four possible start points, only three of which warranted serious contemplation. The option rejected out of hand was a 500-mile advance from Massowah on the Red Sea coast to Abu Haras on the Blue Nile, a vast distance across which the difficulties of water and transport were certain to be insurmountable. Strangely, notwithstanding that he had nominated Shendy as the concentration area, Wolseley's memo actually cited the distances between the start points and Berber. In all cases, then, it is necessary to add another 100 miles to his figures to obtain the true distance to the concentration area, or 200 miles if one seeks to reflect the distance from the start points to Khartoum. The viable start points were limited to the ports of Massowah and Suakin on the Red Sea Coast and Wādī Halfā on the Nile, options 1, 2 and 3 in that order, covering distances of 603, 245 and 666 miles respectively (plus 200 in all cases). He had chosen Wādī Halfā as the assembly area for the river option because, 'the Nile even when low, presents little obstacles [sic] to the collection of the troops, stores, &c., required, at that place, and at full Nile no obstacles at all.'

Option 1, Massowah to the junction of the Atbara River with the Nile, a distance of 603 miles, would entail an 11-week desert march and require a baggage-train of 5,000 camels for provisions alone. Although the Atbara generally ceased to exist in September, Wolseley considered that there would be sufficient waterholes remaining for the force to sustain itself. In considering Option 2, Suakin to Berber, an eye-catching 245 miles, Wolseley noted that, 'the water difficulties are so great along this route, that not more than 300 cavalry or 400 infantry could move along it daily between the several places where drinking water is at present obtainable.' He continued, 'Our recent experience has shown us the warlike character of the tribes living about it; their hostility would make the march of small detachments along it extremely dangerous...If the Suakin-Berber road were safe, of course the force might be passed over it in small detachments; but as it is now, the march of such a force as that contemplated, by this route, would be an extremely difficult and dangerous operation.' Surprisingly, Option 2 is ranked behind Option 1, with its inherently daunting prospect of marching through a wilderness for 11 weeks.

On top of the pile was Option 3, Wādī Halfā to Berber, a distance of 666 miles, including the transit of the 'Great Bend'. Of course Wolseley's paper should have reflected a total of 866 miles to Khartoum. Additionally an army cannot just pop up in Wādī Halfā; there is the small matter of the 560 miles (as the crow flies) from Cairo to Wādī Halfā which the paper failed to discuss. Nonetheless the advice to the Secretary of State was unequivocal:

Although much longer than either of the other two routes, it has, in my opinion, numerous advantages over them. In the first place, an ample supply of good drinking water, the most serious want in a tropical and desert region, is always at hand. Then again the difficulty of transport is reduced to very narrow limits.

I would propose to send all the dismounted portion of the force up the Nile to Khartum [sic] in boats, as we sent the little expeditionary force from Lake Superior to Fort Garry on the Red River in 1870...Of the total distance by river from Wady Halfa to Berber (666 miles) 224 miles of that distance is navigable

by steamers at one stretch, and a railway is finished for 33 miles, and only requires the rails to finish 22 miles further. There are also two stretches of about 70 miles each, easily navigable by light draft steamers at high Nile, and by ordinary sailing boats. In fact there would only be about 200 miles of difficult navigation between Wady Halfa and Berber.

Remembering the great superiority of river over land transport, the ease with which stores of all sorts are carried in boats, the great distance comparatively speaking, than can be traversed daily in boats, and the vast saving that there would be in expense, I have no hesitation whatever in saying that the river route from Wady Halfa to Khartum is infinitely preferable to any other.¹

When Wolseley wrote these words in the first week of April, they constituted a compelling enough argument. For reasons we will come to they would have constituted an even stronger one had they focussed not on reaching Khartoum via Berber, but on using water transport only as far as Ambukol or Korti, towns from which it was possible to strike out across the Bayūda for Metemmeh, which lay just across the river from Shendy.

Hartington's response to Wolseley's first memorandum was to pose the obvious question, 'Is there no point on the Nile between the southern end of the Wady Halfa railroad and Berber where further progress in boats becomes impossible?'² Wolseley's advice had been penned in the reasonable expectation of exploiting high-Nile to good advantage. He responded to Hartington's question, in a memorandum dated 14 April, with the suggestion that Sir Redvers Buller be consulted as a veteran of the Red River expedition. He also added, 'The more I consider the difficulties and the hardships and dangers to health to be encountered on both the discussed routes, the more impressed I become with the advantages of the Nile route in preference to the land march from Suakin to Berber.'³ Crucially the memo also addressed the question of time, by fixing 15 November as the latest date to which Gordon could reasonably be expected to hold out. Working back from his cut-off point, Wolseley advised that the expedition should be at Berber by no later than 20 October. In the event that the government decided to send an expedition via Suakin, then the force should be assembled there by not later than 1 September. Ironically, at the time these words of advice were written, a British field force had only just departed Suakin.

The *bona fide* answer to Hartington's question was that nobody in London was quite sure how difficult navigation of the Nile became if one continued past Merowe into the Great Bend. Perhaps unsurprisingly 'we don't know', was not an answer the politicians were ever given. Instead they would be presented only with the unshakeable confidence of a Red River clique who believed that they could get small boats anywhere they chose. The techniques used in Canada had included tracking, poling and portage. Poling of course relies on shallow water, while portages cannot be too lengthy or conducted over impossible terrain. Portages in Canada frequently relied

¹ Colvile, OH, i, 29-30.

² Ibid, i, 30.

³ Ibid, i, 31.

on the technique of moving boats on log rollers, but rollers cannot be used if there are no trees to cut them from, nor can they be of any utility in rocky desert terrain.

5.2 GOVERNMENTAL INDECISION

It was only right that General Stephenson as the erstwhile theatre commander be consulted. He too addressed a long memorandum to Hartington, in which his thoughts did not differ materially from Wolseley's in respect of the size and type of force. In the matter of the axis, however, there was a fundamental divergence of opinion. For Stephenson the winning advantages of the Suakin-Berber caravan road included the fact that it was far shorter than any other approach and that the operation would be based on a defended seaport only 4½ days steaming from Cairo. This would enable large tonnages of supplies to be quickly established and easily maintained, comparatively close to the front. Additionally the arrangements for casualty evacuation would be infinitely superior; reinforcements could be brought up quickly; and the relief column and evacuees could be extricated far more rapidly at the close of the campaign. Acknowledging the shortage of water along the caravan road, Stephenson proposed overcoming this by marching in detachments and establishing nine or ten fortified posts, where water could be stockpiled. Crucially, he estimated that the overall journey time for a force moving from Suakin to Khartoum could be reckoned at nine weeks. He added that the oppressive heat of summer could be mitigated by delaying the start until mid-October. Though Stephenson did not explicitly state it in quite this way, the inference was that he could bring a relief column to Khartoum just before Christmas. Because nobody had yet raised with him the idea of using a specially commissioned fleet of small boats, he imagined the proposed Nile expedition boating through Egypt, aboard steamers and local sail-boats, then marching 860 miles from Wādī Halfā to Khartoum via the Great Bend. In discussing planning factors, he observed that the evacuation of the significant numbers of sick soldiers likely to arise 'during the hot weather' was certain to present a complication. Of the likely transport difficulties he remarked, 'There would be an insufficiency of food on the road for the number of camels required. The same remark applies to the cavalry horses and battery mules. The supply of forage for these animals raises a difficulty which I am unable as yet to resolve.' This last sentence raised a vital issue, which really ought to have received more attention in London than it evidently did. The long march from Wādī Halfā was then dismissed with, 'Four months, at least, would be required before Khartum [sic] was reached. Under the circumstances I consider this route quite unsuited for the purpose intended.'¹

Wolseley's advice was not accepted immediately because it looked illogical on the map, GOC Cairo evidently did not agree with it and, as far as the Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary were concerned, the War Office might as well have been playing at wargames. The Admiralty was invited to comment on the feasibility of the Nile route and duly tasked Vice-Admiral Lord John Hay, C-in-C Mediterranean Station, to look into the matter. On 1 May Hay gave orders for a team of officers, under Captain Robert Molyneux RN, to set forth and reconnoitre the Nile. The man tasked with going

¹ Stephenson to Hartington, 5 May 84; see Colvile, OH, i, 32-4.

furthest south was Commander Tynte Hammill of *HMS Monarch*, who arrived at Wādī Halfā on 15 May, and whose particular job was to look at the 212 miles of river between the foot of the Second Cataract and the far side of the Third. In the event, telegraphic toing and froing, about whether it was safe for him to proceed south of Wādī Halfā, prevented his setting off for Hannek for another fortnight.¹

5.3 FALL OF BERBER

Muḥammad al-Khair, a venerable Berberine theologian under whom Muḥammad Aḥmad had studied in his youth, had been appointed by his former pupil as the Amīr of Berber. By the middle of May he had closed in on his home town and subjected it to a loose siege. Included in the rebel force were the Robatab, Muḥammad al-Khair's own people, and a body of turncoat Shā'iqiā under the Amīr Aḥmad al-Heddai. The loyalist mudir, Ḥusain Pasha Khalīfa, disposed around 1,000 *fellaheen* regulars, 600 *bāshi-būzuqs*, 800 Berberine irregulars and 400 of his 'Abābda kinsmen. An attack mounted at 3.00 *am* on 26 May quickly succeeded in breaching the defences.² Those who survived the break-in were driven into the open, where they rallied and formed square beside the Nile. The mudir, meanwhile, had been wounded and had taken refuge about the town. When at length he was discovered, he was forced to send an order instructing his men to lay down their arms. According to Wingate a massacre lasting the best part of two days then ensued.³

It is often said that such had been the deafening silence for the past several weeks that Cairo and London remained oblivious to the fall of Berber for the best part of a month. What actually happened was that Edwin Egerton, (Sir Evelyn Baring's stand-in during a protracted absence at a London conference), and the British consul in Suakin both wired the news to Granville on 1 June,⁴ only four days after the fact. While the authorities in Suakin never doubted the report, Egerton changed his mind on the basis of rumours presented as intelligence by Muṣṭafa Yāwar Pasha, the Mudir of Dongola. Several of the mudir's telegrams suggested that Berber was still resisting, whereas in reality Ḥusain Pasha Khalīfa had been clapped in irons and sent to the Mahdī's encampment at Rahad in Kordofan.

5.4 COVERING THE FRONTIER

On 29 May Major Herbert Kitchener, one of the EA officers despatched upcountry by the Sirdar to gather intelligence, wired his chief from Korosko to say that travellers had reported that Abū-Hamed was in the hands of the enemy and that they had seen a large rebel force at Murad, the wells halfway between the two towns. Kitchener went on to say that he had sent parties of 'friendlies' to watch the usual desert routes. In addition Shaikh Saleh, a son of Ḥusain Pasha Khalīfa and the commander of a

¹ Hay to the Secretary for the Admiralty, 28 May 84; see Egypt 25/1884, 70. Note that Colvile (i, 37) is in error in implying that Hammill left on or about 18 May; it was 28 May.

² Wood to Watson, 23 Aug. 1884; see Egypt 35/1884, 75.

³ Wingate, *Mahdism*, 121.

⁴ Baker to Granville, and Egerton to Granville, both dated 1 Jun. 84; see Egypt No. 25/1884, 70.

contingent of 'Abābda loyalists, had been sent to investigate the situation at Murad.¹ Although the intelligence had not yet been confirmed, Egerton and the generals made an immediate decision to send two EA battalions to Aswan.² By 3 June Saleh had returned to Korosko to report: the enemy had indeed been at Murad but had since fallen back to Abū-Hamed.

On 9 June Kitchener submitted a report advising Wood of the fall of Berber. In forwarding Kitchener's despatches to London, Egerton added the caveat, 'Information received from other sources [i.e. the Mudir of Dongola] makes this news difficult to credit.' When the Sirdar wired Korosko suggesting that there were grounds to doubt that Berber had fallen, Kitchener expressed bemusement:

*I do not think you need doubt accuracy of news I sent. The effect on the tribes has been considerable, and there was wailing all night. A well-known retainer of Khalifa's family brought the news. Khalifa's sons are much affected, and declare themselves responsible that the news is true. I have done my utmost to give you the news first, but it must be all through Egypt tomorrow. What is the reason for your doubting it?*³

It was not until 26 June, more than a fortnight after Kitchener had first wired in the news, that Egerton finally notified Granville that there was no longer any doubt that Berber had fallen.⁴

The time had come for the Army of Occupation to support the Sirdar's defensive measures in the south. On 22 June Stephenson notified Hartington that he was moving 1st Royal Sussex from Assiut to Aswan, to bolster the Egyptian battalions, and was contemplating sending a second British battalion to Kenah, midway between Assiut and Aswan.⁵ The Royal Sussex set off upriver on 26 June and arrived at Aswan on 7 July, while the 2nd. Bn. The Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry (DCLI) left Cairo on 4 July and reached Kenah five days later.⁶

In London, meanwhile, the government had been drawn into contemplating the Suakin-Berber axis, as most of the other advice they had been given diverged from Wolseley's. In a memorandum dated 19 May, Colonel Sir Andrew Clarke RE, the Inspector-General of Fortifications, had advocated the construction of a Suakin-Berber railway but, like all the other ideas being bandied about, it was contemplated too long by ministers and, under scathing attack from Wolseley, soon fell out of favour.

Like Kitchener at Korosko, the EA intelligence officer at Assiut, Major (EA Rank) Edward Stuart-Wortley had drummed up a force of friendlies – 500 camel-mounted Jowasi Bedouin under Shaikh Djelani. In the light of growing concerns about the Arba'in road and the Libyan Desert, Stuart-Wortley was instructed to establish

¹ Kitchener to Wood, 29 May 84; see Egypt No 25/1884, 69.

² Egerton to Granville, 30 May; Ibid, 69.

³ Kitchener to Wood, 11 Jun. 84; Ibid, 118.

⁴ Egerton to Granville, 26 Jun. 84; Ibid, 26.

⁵ Stephenson to Hartington, 22 Jun. 84; Ibid, 119.

⁶ Colvile, OH, i, 43-4.

outposts at two key oases west of the Nile.¹ Lieutenant Colonel Henry Colvile accompanied Stuart-Wortley to assess the viability of the Arba'in road as an invasion route. They reached the Beris Oasis on 9 July, where they left 400 Jowasi in situ. The long haul to the Selima Oasis took until 25 July, but by the end of the month they had made their way in to Wādī Halfā. Colvile's report advised that scarcity of water rendered the Arba'in axis impracticable for anything in excess of 1,000 men. In the meantime, the Mahdīst amīr Aḥmad al-Heddai had put June to good use by advancing from Abū-Hamed to Ambukol, acquiring several thousand adherents as he went. A loyalist hastened ahead to warn the garrison at Debbah with the result that when, on 5 July, al-Heddai attempted a dawn attack, he ran into fierce resistance, took heavy casualties and was forced to retreat. Still bemused by Muṣṭafa Yāwar Pasha's flowery and imaginative reports, the authorities in Cairo agreed Kitchener's suggestion that he leave Major Harry Rundle in charge at Korosko and make his way upriver to Dongola. He arrived on 1 August to find the mudir fully in control of the situation. A few days later Kitchener accompanied Muṣṭafa Yāwar upriver to Debbah and saw for himself the hundreds of Mahdīst dead strewn about the old fort.²

5.5 'THE BATTLE OF THE ROUTES'

Commander Hammill had returned to Wādī Halfā on 9 June and set off for Cairo the following day. He produced a comprehensive report covering every conceivable aspect of navigating the Second and Third Cataracts. He had concluded that the 212-mile stretch of river could be divided between 190 miles of open water and a mathematically unsound 22½ miles of rapids, (the figures actually add up to 24½). While the Second Cataract could be deemed to be 8½ miles long and the Third or Hannek Cataract three miles long, intervening between them were the less formidable cataracts of Semneh (2 miles in length), Ambako (1 mile), Tanjur (3 miles), Akasheh (1 mile), Dal (4 miles), Amara (1 mile) and Kajbar (1 mile).³ As interesting as Hammill's report is, one should not lose sight of the fact that to get to Wādī Halfā it is first necessary to travel the entire length of Egypt, and that the stretch of river he surveyed from Wādī Halfā to Hannek is less than one third of Wolseley's 666 miles to Berber, and less than one quarter of the full-length journey from Wādī Halfā to Khartoum. On 3 August, Lord Hay, after consulting with Hammill, signalled from *HMS Helicon* at Alexandria that he had, 'formed the opinion that the 400 boat proposal was not practicable.'⁴

Wolseley had evidently had advance sight of the Hammill report and hurriedly assembled a three-man committee of Red River men to beat C-in-C Mediterranean to the draw. The committee submitted its own findings four days ahead of Hay's verdict.⁵ At the beginning of their submission, the army triumvirate, consisting of Major General

¹ See Egerton to Granville, 6 May 84; see Egypt No. 25/1884, 27. This telegram traces the intent to despatch Stuart-Wortley into the desert, though he did not actually depart Assiut until 1 Jul.

² Wingate, *Mahdism*, 122-4.

³ See Colvile, OH, Appendix O, i, 141-172, where Hammill's report is incorporated in full.

⁴ For full details of Hay's reply see Colvile, OH, i, 38-9.

⁵ See Colvile, OH, i, 38-40.

Sir Redvers Buller VC, Major General Sir John McNeill VC and Colonel William Butler, stated that they had read the Molyneux and Hammill reports and had been able to engage in discussions at the Admiralty with the First Naval Lord, Admiral Sir Astley Cooper Key. Butler was unusual amongst his peer-group in that he was a Jesuit-educated Irish Catholic.¹ A gallant and able soldier to be sure, he was also ambitious, opinionated and mercurial. He was also a poor team player, although his devotion to Wolseley usually served to hold this unhelpful trait in check.² Married since 1877 to the artist Elizabeth Thompson, (later Lady Butler), he had served with the Ring in Canada, Asanteland and Egypt. When Colonel Hammill Stewart's imminent trip to Canada had been cancelled so that he could accompany Gordon to Khartoum, Butler had been sent in his stead. He sailed from Liverpool in early February, worked with the Government of Canada for something around six weeks and was back in England by April.³ It has already been observed that Butler remarks in his autobiography that he saw a good deal of Wolseley at this time: 'With him I had many interviews after my return...and we discussed at length the various routes by which Khartoum could be reached by troops.'⁴ Evidently the 8 and 14 April memoranda to Hartington had relied as much on Butler's input as Wolseley's. The colonel's energy, resolve and past experience of small-boat work would make him the ideal candidate to run a Red River re-enactment on the Nile for, if nothing else was certain, it was that the Admiralty had no intention of doing so.

The submission of the Red River triumvirate was superficial in comparison with the offerings of their naval counterparts, but they insisted nonetheless that, 'In our opinion the question really resolves into this: is it possible to procure and place on the Nile at Sarras 500 boats by the 5th October?' They proceeded to answer their own question with a trite, 'Surely this would be possible.' It will be recalled that Wolseley's memo of 14 April, which is to say some three and half months earlier, had identified 15 November as the latest date to which Gordon could be expected to hold out. From this it follows that the triumvirate was allowing 41 days to cover 860 miles of river, including the Third to Sixth Cataracts inclusive, or an average rate of 21 miles a day against the current. This was the first of the minor miracles they would need to perform. Given that this would all have to be done from a standing start, the other tall order was to get, within 67 days, (9½ weeks), some or all of the boatyards dispersed around the British Isles to construct several hundred specially designed boats, gather them into batches at seaports, have them shipped to Alexandria and then get them moved up the Nile to a point beyond the Second Cataract. As we have seen the requirement would later evolve to become two batches each of 400 boats.

It was probably because the triumvirate's memorandum was so light on substance that Butler followed it up with a note to Wolseley of his own.⁵ Butler made the perfectly sensible observation that the navy had reported from the point of view of

¹ For full career details see Butler's autobiography of 1911.

² Wolseley to his wife, 5 Nov. 84; see Arthur (ed.), *Wolseley Letters*, 128.

³ Butler, *Autobiography*, 269.

⁴ *Ibid*, 271.

⁵ Butler to Wolseley, 5 Aug. 84; see Colvile, OH, i, 40-3.

getting steamers and *nuggars* through the first three cataracts, but that this was not what he was proposing. In his third last paragraph, Butler wrote:

*I have not yet seen the Nile above Cairo and its neighbourhood, and so far, I labour under a disadvantage in writing these rough notes, but I have had considerable and varied experience in ascending rapid and dangerous rivers. Water is water, and rock is rock, whether they lie in America or in Africa, and the conditions which they can assume towards each other are much the same all the world over.*¹

‘Water is water and rock is rock’: it was hardly the most scientific of arguments, but that no longer mattered, for while the final act in the ‘Battle of the Routes’ had yet to play itself out, its outcome had already been ordained. The long-running debate had been resolved by the nagging calls of the Adjutant-General on the office of the Secretary of State for War, coupled with the seemingly imminent collapse of khedival authority in Dongola Province. The crisis in northern Sudan allowed Wolseley to argue that a Nile expedition would serve not only to save Gordon, but would also shield Upper Egypt and regain lost territory as it went.² There had been a period when these objectives had been eminently compatible, but so much time had been squandered in the interim that the relief of Khartoum now depended above all else on rapidity. Even so, day after day, the leading professional soldier in the land had pressed the case for boats; and who was Lord Hartington, a civilian minister, to overturn the professional judgement of the conqueror of Egypt?

5.6 GLADSTONE GIVES WAY

On the evening of Monday 4 August, Butler received a telegram from Wolseley which said simply, ‘I want to see you here tomorrow.’ Butler guessed correctly that the government was on the verge of folding in the face of a storm of protest over its inaction. What he could not have guessed at was quite how Gladstone’s hand had been forced. The agent of change had been Hartington, long since driven to distraction by a succession of Friday cabinet meetings, in which he had been afforded only five minutes at what he called the ‘fag end’³ of the day’s proceedings, to discuss the deteriorating situation in Egypt and Sudan. He changed tack in advance of the 25 July meeting, by circulating a memorandum to his cabinet colleagues laying out the clear necessity to take military measures in the Nile Valley. The provisions outlined in the note had been conceived by Wolseley, and pressed the urgent need to send a British brigade up the Nile in small boats as far as Dongola, against the contingency of operations for the relief of Khartoum ‘eventually becoming necessary’.⁴ Hartington and Wolseley knew only too well that such operations were already overdue, but even

¹ Butler to Wolseley, 4 Aug. 84; Ibid, i, 43.

² Hartington to Granville, 15 Jul. 84; quoted in Holland, *Life of Devonshire*, i, 467.

³ Hartington to Granville, 15 Jul. 84; see Holland, *Life of Devonshire*, i, 466.

⁴ Hartington to Cabinet Members, 29 Jul. 84; Ibid, i, 472-5.

now had to pander to Gladstone's conviction that Gordon could leave Khartoum by steamer any time he chose. The cost of moving a brigade of 3,000 men up to Dongola had been provisionally estimated at £300,000, although all the senior figures at the War Office knew that 3,000 men would be too few to effect the relief of Khartoum.

When Hartington insisted on his memorandum being put to the vote, the cabinet divided nine votes to three in favour of proceeding with military preparations. One of the hold-outs, predictably enough, was the Prime Minister himself, who tried to mollify Hartington by promising to write to him over the weekend outlining his personal reading of the situation. The promised note turned out to be an exercise in Gladstonian obfuscation and led Hartington to anticipate only continued inaction. No longer prepared as a point of honour to be brushed aside, to abandon Gordon to his fate, or to face an angry Wolseley, Hartington channelled an indirect threat of resignation through Granville and awaited Gladstone's response.¹ It was not a bluff Gladstone could afford to call. Wearily he tried to pretend to Hartington that he had never been opposed to making reasonable preparations for a relief expedition.² At the next meeting of the cabinet he conceded that a 'Vote of Credit', in the sum of £300,000, could be put to Parliament the following week. The measure sailed through the Commons on Thursday 7 August.

5.7 BUTLER AND THE WHALER SCHEME

When Butler reported to Wolseley two days ahead of the Vote of Credit, he was handed a bundle of papers containing all the correspondence so far transacted between the War Office and the Admiralty in respect of the small boat proposal.³ The Royal Navy was of the opinion that it would take 2-3 months to construct 400 boats of the sort Wolseley proposed.⁴ Butler was told to find boats suited to the role or, if they did not exist, to scope their construction from new. Lieutenant Colonel James Alleyne RA, another Red River hand, had been called in to assist him.⁵ By lunchtime the following day, they had concluded that the boats would have to be manufactured. An early morning visit to a Lambeth boatyard had convinced them that small enterprising firms were perfectly capable of building small numbers of boats inside a month.⁶ The recipe for success, therefore, would be based not on engaging a few firms to build large numbers of boats, but on inviting a large number of firms to build a relatively small number of boats. For Butler forty times ten worked nicely. What he did not yet have was a design. Butler considered that the boat he wanted would have to be, 'large but light, safe in cataract but swift in smooth waters, fast-sailing but easy to row, roomy but small of draught, strong but portable, heavy with cargo but light of build, staunch but elastic, slight but lasting.'⁷

¹ Hartington to Granville, 31 Jul. 84; *Ibid*, i, 476.

² Gladstone to Granville, subsequently forwarded to Hartington, 31 Jul. 84; *Ibid*, i, 477-8.

³ Butler, *Autobiography*, 272.

⁴ Butler, *Campaign of the Cataracts*, 11.

⁵ *Ibid*, 12.

⁶ The Lambeth yard offered to build five in that time. Butler, *Autobiography*, 273.

⁷ Butler, *Campaign of the Cataracts*, 17.

The best place to search for such a vessel was surely the naval dockyard at Portsmouth. Butler and Alleyne spent the afternoon of Wednesday 6 August firing off telegrams to prepare the ground for a meaningful visit the following day, including instructions to all the local boat-building firms to send along a representative. The colonels left London on the morning train and reached Portsmouth before noon.¹ The handful of ship's boats presented for inspection on the basin met with short shrift. In the nearby boat-loft Butler proceeded to reject ship's cutters, captain's gigs, life-boats and jolly-boats. Next he walked through a large store-shed, where his eye fell by chance on a useful-looking whale-gig resting across the rafters. The gig was taken down to the basin to be loaded with the 100 days' rations Butler had requisitioned in preparation for a trial. A dozen dock-hands rowed the gig into the basin: although it was unduly heavy and too small for its cargo, it appeared satisfactory in most other respects. Butler noted that he would need a boat which was four feet longer, 18 inches wider in the beam and a few inches deeper. This meant that the perfect Nile whaler would be 30 feet in length, 6ft 6" across the beam and 2ft 3" in depth. It was to come with two collapsible masts and sails, a dozen oars and all the requisite fittings. The overall weight of boat and accessories was not to exceed a thousand pounds. There was no question but that a bigger, lighter boat would be a tall order. Ten boats each inside a month, queried Butler. Doubtless the boat-builders sucked their teeth on cue, but they were enterprising Englishmen and there was a profit to be turned. Provided the terms of the contract were generous enough to allow them to take on extra hands and work around the clock, of course they could do it. Butler and Alleyne did not as yet have the authority to spend a five pound note so, with grateful thanks to everybody involved and a promise that they would be in touch shortly, they took their leave and hastened back to London.

Over the next three days, which included a weekend, the two colonels had design drawings made and despatched to every boat building firm known to the Admiralty. All were invited to tender by return and most did so, with firms distributed along the Thames and the Clyde much to the forefront. There were to be four points of delivery at the end of the 28 days allowed; London, Portsmouth, Liverpool and Glasgow.² On Tuesday 12 August Butler was summoned to the interview with Lord Hartington described at the beginning of Chapter 4 and given his blank cheque.³ With that the clock started running on the relief of Khartoum. There were three months to go before the expiry of the 15 November deadline Wolseley had set back in April, one of which would now be consumed by boat-building in England. If 'Relieve Khartoum by 15 November and immediately extricate Gordon and the garrison', or some such form of words, represented what would now be termed the Military Strategic Objective, it should even now have been obvious that the nascent campaign plan was unlikely to prove compatible with it.

5.8 STEPHENSON DEMURS

¹ For the visit to Portsmouth; Ibid, 22-5.

² Butler, *Campaign of the Cataracts*, 28.

³ Butler, *Autobiography*, 274.

The reason why Hartington had felt the need to ask Butler if he was quite sure that he could deliver on his 28-day guarantee was that GOC Cairo had not lamely fallen into line with the small-boat proposal. At 10.00 *pm* the previous Thursday, Hartington had wired Stephenson with news of the vote of credit and to ask what size of force he would be able to deploy from the Army of Occupation.¹ The more detailed written instructions drafted the following day ran to several pages and would have been prepared by Wolseley and his staff for Hartington's signature. A second letter dated the same day devolved the detail to Stephenson: 'I have further to add, that having in my despatch of this date given you a general outline of the operations which Her Majesty's Government consider may become necessary, and of the preparations which should be undertaken, I desire to leave the details of these, as much as possible, to your judgement, acting on your knowledge of the circumstances, and of the resources at your disposal.'² The two letters would not make it to Cairo until late the following week.

Hartington's telegram, however, was on Stephenson's desk on Monday 11 August. At 1.10 *pm* the same day he replied:

Yours 7th. Can move to Wady Halfa 4 battalions 2,200 bayonets, two squadrons 200 sabres, 1 battery horse or field artillery, 2 batteries mountain [artillery], mounted infantry. No Royal Engineers to spare. Can leave detachment Wady Halfa and move on remainder as far as Semneh right bank.

Small boats proposed not suitable. Can procure large amount water transport locally.³

After everything he had gone through to convince the Cabinet of the merits of Wolseley's plan, this was not what Hartington wanted to hear. It was undoubtedly this telegram which resulted in Butler being called in to reassure the minister the following day. Having authorised Butler to proceed, Hartington replied to Stephenson at 8.40 *pm* on Tuesday evening:

Yours 11th. You will receive Thursday my despatch of 8th containing instructions as to movement of troops. But in the possible contingency of necessity of advance to Dongola, or even Khartoum, Admiralty reports lead me to doubt whether operation could be conducted with local land or water transport within next winter and without enormous expense. Experienced officers here confident of practicability of boat plan, and I propose to adhere to it, and provide 400 at once. General Earle returns tomorrow [to Egypt from home leave] to take command under you of force at Wady Halfa. General Buller will go next week as his Chief of Staff. Report your proceedings fully.⁴

¹ Hartington to Stephenson, 7 Aug. 84; see Egypt No. 35/1884, 13.

² Hartington to Stephenson, 8 Aug. 84; *Ibid*, 16-17.

³ Stephenson to Hartington, 11 Aug. 84; *Ibid*, 32.

⁴ Hartington to Stephenson, 12 Aug. 84; *Ibid*, 34.

The appointments announced in the last paragraph represented a compromise proposed by Wolseley in the wake of what he termed, 'a regular turn up' with the Duke of Cambridge. Although Wolseley liked Earle and counted him an old friend, he strongly objected to, 'entrusting any independent command to an untried unproved man as long as I have available one who has proved himself in the field to be a capable General.' It amounted straightforwardly to a preference for Buller. The Duke stood his ground, however, compelling Wolseley to accept that Buller, junior in seniority, would be chief of staff to Earle rather than vice versa.¹ In the Duke's defence, it is readily apparent why the head of the Army would feel the need to take such a stand.

On Friday Hartington and Wolseley drafted another long letter designed to explain the merits of the boat plan more fully. It incorporated what for Wolseley was a key point: if the troops were moved from Wādī Halfā to Dongola, it would in all likelihood be because they had been ordered to proceed to Berber or Khartoum. That being so, they would have to be provided with a means of transport which was going to get them to their destination and back again, before the cooler weather turned over to high summer. This was not a remotely realistic proposition, as GOC Cairo did not hesitate to point out. Stephenson had not seen any of the Secretary of State's long letters when, on Saturday 16 August, he pressed for permission to start passing steamers and other craft through the Second Cataract. He went on, 'Early occupation of Dongola moreover desirable from political as well as military grounds. If approved prompt reply necessary.' He again stated that, 'sufficient and suitable craft can be obtained here, and further supply from Dongola if necessary.' The hire or purchase of suitable boats, he estimated, was likely to cost about £30,000.² It was obviously necessary that Hartington's reply should clear up any lingering confusion.

Before replying to your telegram of the 16th instant, it is desirable to avoid any misunderstanding. Her Majesty's Government wish to be in a position to send a force this season to Dongola, and if necessary to Khartoum. The force to be so equipped that it shall be able to return from Khartoum this winter. From Hammill's reports we believe that it is impossible to effect our object if we employ only steamers and Nile boats; also that to effect it at all there must be at least twelve good steamers on Nile below Assouan, and eight between that place and Wady Halfa. Consequently, until twenty steamers are thus distributed, it appears wrong to pass any steamer above Wady Halfa. In these circumstances we are organizing an expedition in small boats, propelled by their crews beyond Wady Halfa.

You disagree but what do you propose? What force do you propose to send to Dongola, and how would you get it there? If obliged to send a force to Khartoum, what, in round numbers, do you propose it should consist of? How would you send it to Khartoum, and how bring it back? State approximate number of camels you would require to assist in each operation. How many

¹ Wolseley, journal entry 22 Aug. 84; see Preston (ed.), *Relief of Gordon*, 3-7. The entry of 22 Aug. 1884 is remarkable for its sustained spitefulness. Cambridge, Stephenson and Wood are all subjected to character assassination.

² Stephenson to Hartington, 16 Aug. 84; *Ibid.*, 45.

*steamers would you keep north of Wady Halfa before you send any to the south. Report fully.*¹

Stephenson telegraphed his reply on 21 August. His first sentence did not sound a positive note in respect of time. 'Possible to send force New Dongola this season, but impossible, owing to distance, for a force to proceed to Khartoum via Dongola, and return this winter.'² Subsequent events would show that Stephenson was perfectly correct; it was also something which should have appeared from London. He next addressed the size of the force and proceeded to impugn the advisability of advancing a single brigade: 'Force to proceed from New Dongola to Khartoum should not be less than 8,000....If small force you propose to send to New Dongola in first instance does not realise hopes of Government, it will be placed in false position, and difficulties of reinforcing it later with men and stores will be very great, owing to fall of Nile and consequent amount of land transport required.' Next came an outright dismissal of the small boat scheme, followed rapidly by a preference for the Suakin-Berber axis:

Believe expedition to New Dongola by means of small boats impracticable. Difficulties on this river too great. Naval opinion here is in this sense. Can be best done by steamers and local craft, but prompt decision urgent to secure craft for force you propose in yours of 8th. Already arranged that eight steamers be placed above Assouan and twelve below. More available if required. Former fit to pass Second Cataract.

...My own opinion still is in favour of Suakin-Berber route if friendly tribes were armed and subsidized, and would procure sufficient camels, which I believe they easily could. With troops now in Egypt, those coming from Gibraltar and India, and three battalions in addition, should leave force sufficient for Suakin route.

If Hartington found the disagreement between the generals frustrating, Wolseley was irate that GOC Cairo should presume to question his judgement. On 22 August he lambasted Stephenson in the privacy of his journal, although there can be little doubt that he must have shared broadly the same thoughts with Hartington earlier in the day:

*In his telegrams of the last few days Stephenson had shown the greatest confusion of ideas & want of plan: they are worth studying as specimens of confused English and as an illustration of the misfortune of having men of small mental calibre in positions where the power of taking in all the phases of your position both as it exists and will be further on when influenced by change of season, high or low Nile for example, or by easily foreseen [sic] eventualities – such as the end of Gordon's ammunition having been reached – where the grasp of thought required for the solution of such problems is absent.*³

¹ Hartington to Stephenson, 19 Aug. 84; Ibid, 46.

² Stephenson to Hartington, 21 Aug. 84; Ibid, 53-4.

³ Wolseley, journal entry 22 Aug. 84; see Preston (ed.), *Relief of Gordon*, 3-4.

Only that morning, Hartington had wired Gladstone and written to Granville to say that he now wished to send the Adjutant-General to Egypt, on the grounds that, 'we are at cross-purposes here and in Egypt as to the plan of operations on which our preparations are based',¹ that the plan under contemplation was Wolseley's anyway, and that it was neither fair nor prudent to ask Stephenson to accept responsibility for an operation in which he appeared to have no faith. At 2.00 *pm* the Secretary of State for War sent for Wolseley to tell him what he had done.² Hartington would not have been surprised to learn that he was perfectly prepared to take the job on, as Wolseley had written to him on 18 May volunteering his services as the commander of the Suakin-Berber expedition then under contemplation by the government:

*The proposed operation is a serious one, and I should contemplate with a certain amount of dread its being confided to some young ambitious man if you wish to avoid conquest and possibly a big war. I make this proposal with a full sense of the responsibility attaching to it, and with the knowledge that those who do not know me well, may think me self-conceited because of the manner in which I make it.*³

This is an important communication in that it demonstrates Wolseley's anxiety to secure the command in the Sudan, whatever the plan of operation might be. It was of course personal and confidential at the time, but in the glare of the public domain serves only to make Wolseley's strident repudiations of the Suakin-Berber axis appear decidedly disingenuous.

To return to the events of 22 August, it cannot have been a coincidence that the quantity of whalers on order with the boatyards was increased from 400 to 800 that afternoon,⁴ demonstrating not only that Stephenson was right to raise the inadvisability of advancing a single brigade, but that Hartington and Wolseley had been disingenuous in pressing the Cabinet and the Commons to resource the despatch of only 3,000 men. The following day Gladstone and Granville each sent messages consenting to Wolseley's appointment, although it was clear that they both harboured reservations.⁵ Hartington next wrote to the Queen to secure her endorsement.⁶ There was a delay while Victoria conferred with the reluctant C-in-C, but by 26 August the matter had been settled. It was to be announced in the papers the following day.⁷

At midnight on 26 August, Hartington telegraphed Cairo to notify Stephenson that he was about to be superseded. Notwithstanding the scathing remarks in Wolseley's journal, Stephenson was a popular, well regarded figure who had done an

¹ Hartington to Gladstone and *vice versa*, both dated 22 Aug. 84; see Holland, *Life of Devonshire*, i, 483.

² Wolseley, journal entry 22 Aug. 84; see Preston (ed.), *Relief of Gordon*, 5-6. This entry serves as proof positive of Wolseley's anxiety to get one last great campaign under his belt.

³ Wolseley to Hartington, 18 May 84; for the full text see Holland, *Life of Devonshire*, i, 461-2.

⁴ Colvile, OH, i, 63.

⁵ Wolseley, journal entry 23 Aug. 84; see Preston (ed.), *Relief of Gordon*, 8; Holland, *Life of Devonshire*, i, 484-5.

⁶ Hartington to the Queen, 23 Aug. 84; see Holland, *Life of Devonshire*, i, 485-6.

⁷ Wolseley, journal entries 23-6 Aug. 84 inclusive; see Preston (ed.), *Relief of Gordon*, 8-10.

excellent job as GOC. It was inevitable that his first thoughts were of resignation. He had pretty much made up his mind to go, when he received a letter written by Wolseley around a week earlier. The letter saw Wolseley at his charming best: he could quite understand why, not having been on the Red River, Stephenson found the small boat scheme unconvincing. Indeed without his Canadian experience to draw upon, he might also have arrived at the same conclusion. Nonetheless he was quite sure that Stephenson would throw as much energy into the scheme as if he had devised it himself.¹ The letter had been rapidly overtaken by events, but was enough to make the difference between Stephenson resigning and staying on to help: he wired Hartington with a simple acceptance of his lot: 'Yours 27th. Will willingly remain here as you wish.'² In the event Stephenson would be so helpful that even Wolseley would have no grounds for complaint. Thus far Gladstone had sanctioned only the preparations for an advance on Dongola. No executive order to proceed to Khartoum had yet been given and it was upon the Prime Minister's continuing reticence that Hartington now focussed all his powers of persuasion.

5.9 WOLSELEY TAKES COMMAND

Wolseley sailed for Cairo aboard *HMS Iris* in company with Lord Northbrook, the new High Commissioner to Egypt, and Sir Evelyn Baring, returning to his duties as consul-general. The party arrived at Alexandria on Tuesday 9 September. By 8.00 *pm* the same day Wolseley and his aides had been quartered at the *Kasr el Noussa* Palace. The following morning the general called at the Abdin Palace, to pay his respects to Tawfīq Pasha. From there he moved to the British agency, for a meeting attended by Northbrook, Baring, Egerton, Stephenson and the two principal British officers of the Cairo Police. Amongst other things, they agreed a force level beyond which the Cairo garrison could not be denuded.³ Later in the day, Wolseley dealt with all the senior appointments. Lieutenant General Sir Frederick Stephenson KCB would command all troops north of Assiut, which left him in charge of the Cairo and Alexandria garrisons much as before. Major General Sir Redvers Buller VC, KCMG, CB would be Wolseley's chief of staff, while Major General William Earle CB, CSI, ordinarily the garrison commander in Alexandria, would command the troops at Wādī Halfā and points south. Command of the mounted troops would rest with Colonel Sir Herbert Stewart KCB, who would thus be subordinate to Earle. Major General Sir Evelyn Wood VC, KCB would act as GOC Lines of Communication. The post of Deputy Adjutant-General (D.A.G.) Intelligence Branch went to Sir Charles Wilson, while the D.A.G. General Staff was to be to Colonel Henry Brackenbury CB, RA.⁴

By 11 September Wolseley was ready to commit to an outline plan and wrote to Hartington to press for the urgent despatch of the additional men and materiel he

¹ Wolseley, journal entry 9 Sep. 84; *Ibid*, 12.

² Stephenson to Hartington, 29 Aug. 84; see Egypt No. 35/1884, 63.

³ Wolseley, journal entries 9 & 10 Sep. 84; see Preston (ed.), *Relief of Gordon*, 11-14.

⁴ Colvile, OH, i, 52.

would need to succour Khartoum.¹ He began by enumerating the forces available in Egypt or *en route* there:

	Rank & File
1 Regiment of Cavalry (mounted)	365
13½ Battalions of Infantry	8,887
1 Battery Royal Horse Artillery	159
1 Field Battery	135
1 Camel Battery	119
2 Garrison Batteries	225
3 Companies of Engineers	569
Mounted Infantry	423
Total	10,882

Wolseley next went on to say that, after he had made adequate provision for Cairo and Alexandria, he would be left with a deployable balance of three cavalry squadrons, a regiment of mounted infantry, nine battalions and a camel battery; or 300 sabres, 423 MI, 6,000 bayonets and 6 mountain-guns. Six of the battalions would be required to secure the lines of communication, leaving an inadequate three battalions for the final push on Khartoum.

In his tenth paragraph Wolseley itemised the reinforcements he would need, including the manpower needed to breathe life into the second of his 'novel expedients':

....it is in my opinion absolutely necessary to send here with the least possible delay two battalions of infantry from Malta, and the following detachments from England, to be here converted into a camel corps. This camel corps should be based on the same principle that was lately adopted in raising a corps of 200 mounted infantry from the line battalions at home, namely by obtaining so many men and one or two officers as volunteers from each of the following regiments or battalions:

	Rank and File
<i>From the seven battalions of Foot Guards, 40 men from each</i>	280
<i>From the 16 regiments of cavalry of the line at home, 40 men from each</i>	640
<i>From the three regiments of Household Cavalry</i>	100
<i>From the two battalions of the Rifle Brigade at home</i>	80

¹ Wolseley to Hartington, 11 Sep. 84; Ibid, i, 54-8.

Wolseley next moved on to describe the composition of the force he intended to assemble at Shendi:

11. This would enable a fighting force to be placed in line somewhere about the neighbourhood of Shendi, composed (in round numbers) as follows: -

	<i>Rank and File</i>
<i>Five battalions of infantry</i>	<i>3,500</i>
<i>19th Hussars</i>	<i>300</i>
<i>Mounted Infantry now existing</i>	<i>400</i>
<i>Camel Corps which Admiral Lord J</i>	
<i>Hay will place at my disposal from Royal Marines</i>	<i>100</i>
<i>Camel Corps coming from England</i>	<i>1,100</i>
	<hr/> <i><u>5,400</u></i>

Say 5,000 fighting men with 6 guns.

12. I have given this subject the deepest thought during my journey from England, and have had the advantage of obtaining the views of the authorities here as to the military position in the Sudan, and, as at present informed, I am decidedly of the opinion that with no smaller force would it be safe to advance upon Khartum.

Wolseley's final paragraph was designed to secure prompt compliance with his requirements and preclude any possibility of further procrastination.

18. I should be wanting in my duty if I did not point out in the clearest terms that, unless the force in Egypt be augmented forthwith to the extent I have proposed, we shall not be able to relieve General Gordon this year if the force now surrounding him remains where it is; and it is a certainty, in my opinion, that want of ammunition would prevent him from holding out for another 12 months. I cannot, therefore, too strongly urge upon your Lordship the necessity for immediate action if his relief is to be provided for this coming winter.

The abridged essence of the letter was telegraphed to Hartington that day. At some point during the course of the afternoon, telegrams containing some long overdue good news reached Cairo from Colville and Kitchener. The Mudir of Dongola, it seemed, had brought the rebels to battle at Korti and inflicted a serious defeat on them. Verification continued to flow in over the next few days, but such was the extent of the victory that it now looked as if the *mudirieh* of Dongola as far upriver as Merowe was back under government control. Over the next few days, the staff planning and calculations necessary to flesh out an already logistically complex campaign plan continued apace. A little over a week after he had asked for an additional two

battalions from Malta, Wolseley concluded that the changed situation in the south meant that the requirement could now be dropped.

At around this time the Mudir of Dongola wired in a number of misleading reports, suggesting that the rebels at Khartoum had lifted the siege and gone home. The resultant confusion was so serious that Wolseley noted in his journal, 'It is now tolerably certain that the siege of Khartoum has been raised.'¹ The 'news' had a predictable enough effect in London, causing Hartington to wire Wolseley the following day wondering whether the despatch of the Camel Corps ought not to be delayed; a question which met with a courteous but unequivocal no. On Thursday 25 September, Butler arrived from England² in high spirits, as well he might given the scale of his achievement over the past six weeks: the first consignment of whalers had docked at Alexandria three days earlier.³

Contrary to Wolseley's expectations Hartington's officials had experienced no great difficulty in persuading the Duke not to resist the despatch of so many small regimental detachments, although given the choice he would certainly have preferred to send two formed battalions. Seized by the urgency of the scenario, Cambridge now threw the full weight of his office behind the preparations. The camel corps detachments were hurriedly selected by commanding officers, grouped into Guards, Heavy Cavalry and Light Cavalry Divisions, were each inspected and addressed by the Duke at their assembly points and on 26 September embarked aboard the steamships *Australia* and *Deccan*. They would dock at Alexandria on 7 October.⁴ Wolseley got precisely what he had asked for; a hand-picked body of men, universally range-qualified as marksmen, none of whom was under 22 years of age.

In the meantime the call for *voyageurs* had gone out in Canada. It took only 12 days, commencing 1 September, to enlist a contingent of 380 men.⁵ Fifteen years on from the Red River Expedition, the old frontier ways were already receding into history and not all the *voyageurs* were the real thing. They left Quebec on 15 September, under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Fred Denison, who had been Wolseley's militia ADC on the Red River. They would not reach Wādī Halfā until 26 October.⁶ The efforts of the Canadians would be supplemented by 266 West Africans recruited by Major Charles Smyth of the Welsh Regiment.

5.9.1 The Journey Ahead

The movement plan⁷ called for the whaler-borne troops to marry up with their boats at Gemai, a beach just above the Second Cataract, so near the Sarras terminus of the 33-mile stretch of railway running alongside the cataract as to be synonymous with it. Unfortunately there was a journey of almost 800 miles to cover first. Colvile remarked

¹ Wolseley, journal entry 21 Sep. 84; see Preston (ed.), *Relief of Gordon*, 19.

² Butler, *Autobiography*, 276.

³ Colvile, OH, i, 63.

⁴ See Colvile, OH, i, 176-7.

⁵ Comprising 36 Britons, 158 Anglo-Canadians, 93 French-Canadians, 77 Caughnawaga Indians and 16 others.

⁶ See Colvile, OH, i, appx. 4, *Report on Canadian Voyageurs*, 187-190.

⁷ For details of legs and distances; *Ibid*, i, 59-60.

in the Official History that the preparations required over this distance, 'entailed great expenditure of energy and power of organization, but were at the same time of an ordinary character.'¹ The first 229 miles would be covered by a straightforward rail journey from Cairo to Assiut. The next leg, from Assiut to Aswan, was a long river journey of 318 miles and would be traversed using standard Nile craft; a combination of coal-burning steamers, towed barges and native sail-boats. It would then be necessary to disembark men and stores alike, in order to bypass the First Cataract by means of a nine-mile rail journey to Philae. At Philae everything could be re-embarked on boats, for a 210-mile trip to the forward assembly area at Wādī Halfā. It was here that the Camel Corps detachments would begin marching south aboard their animals. As far as the balance of the troops was concerned, the railway from Wādī Halfā to Gemai/Sarras would take care of the next 33-miles, bypassing the Second Cataract in the process, although the poor capacity of the line and low availability of the aged rolling stock meant that most of the whalers would have to be run through the cataract by native boatmen.

From Gemai onwards the whaler-borne troops would be at the oars, while the Camel Corps detachments paralleled their advance on land. It was 29 miles from Gemai to the head of the Dal Cataract, 102 miles from Dal to Kajbar and 31 miles from Kajbar to Hannek. The boats would have to be portaged at both Kajbar and Hannek. Hannek to Dongola, the expedition's immediate objective, was a further 39 miles, meaning that the total length of the journey from Cairo to Dongola was 1,033 miles. If the whaler-borne troops went forward of Dongola to Belal on the Great Bend, just beyond Merowe, they would have a further 176 miles of rowing ahead of them. Of the formidable logistic difficulties of the undertaking, the official history remarked,

*The Nile Expedition was a campaign less against man than against nature and against time. Had British soldiers and Egyptian camels been able to subsist on sand and occasional water, or had the desert produced beef and biscuit, the army might, in spite of its late start, have reached Khartoum in November. But as things were, the rate of progress of the army was dependent on the rate of progress of its supplies.*²

As will shortly be seen, there was in fact no set of circumstances in which a Nile Expedition, starting so late, and proceeding by way of Abū-Hamed and Berber in small boats, could ever have reached Khartoum by the following February, let alone by mid-November. Contrary to Colvile's assertion, it was not logistic factors which governed this, but an operationally untenable time and space equation. This arose, first, because the amount of time available had been foreshortened by the necessity to wait for the whalers to be constructed, shipped and moved upriver; and second, because passing such great quantities of boats through so many choke-points was set to consume time at far too rapid a rate to remain commensurate with the Campaign Objective. If riverine operations have one great weakness, it is that they are inherently inflexible, and flexibility, of course, is a principle of war.

¹ Ibid, i, 60.

² Ibid, i, 61.

5.9.2 Establishing the Lines of Communication

By the middle of September, a month after Butler had placed his initial order, the first 400 whalers had been completed and despatched for Alexandria. The first steamship to depart England was the *Pelican* which sailed on 10 September, with a consignment of 30 boats in her hold, and docked in Egypt 12 days later. The second batch of 400 had departed England in its entirety by 3 October, with the result that all 800 boats were in Egypt by 18 October. There were 19 consignments in all, each of which was accompanied by a 'special service' officer whose primary duty was to rush his boats upriver to Wādī Halfā.¹ Although military orders had been given to the effect that individual boats were on no account to be separated from their ancillaries, Messrs. T. Cook & Sons, contracted to deliver the boats to Wādī Halfā, paid scant heed to the injunction, with the result that considerable time and effort had to be expended on marrying items up at the end of the journey. Some of the ancillaries, including masts, never did find the boat they had been made for and had to be adapted by carpenters to fit another.

From 27 September onwards, an average of 40 whalers a day left Alexandria by rail for Assiut: the final batch was despatched on 20 October.² At Assiut they were transferred into barges which had been specially fitted to carry them in tiers. On arrival at Aswan the barges were moored off Elephantine Island, where the boats were unloaded into the water and, in strings of 20, towed behind a steamer to the foot of the First Cataract. Native boatmen then rowed or poled them through the cataract to Philae, a passage per boat of about five hours' duration. At Philae they were tied in strings of 12 to the sterns of steamers bound for Wādī Halfā. While some boats bypassed the Second Cataract by rail, the majority were taken through the rapids by native boatmen under the direction of Captain Lord Charles Beresford RN. There was also a 1¼ mile portage running in parallel, a task assigned to a 400-strong EA contingent under Lieutenant Colonel Charles Holled Smith. With 30 men to a boat, it was possible to complete the carry in about two hours; the most Holled Smith ever got through in a day was 20. At Gemai the boats were inspected and, where necessary, repaired at an *ad hoc* workshop.³

The task facing GOC Lines of Communication was daunting, although Wood had been well into his stride for several weeks. While the order to push through to Khartoum had still not been given, there was no longer any doubt that it must come. If the 'fighting base' of the expedition was to be at or near Korti or Ambukol, as Wolseley now conceived, then it would be more than a thousand miles from the sea. The whalers would each leave Gemai with 100 days' worth of sealed rations for the ten soldiers on board, but these were the provisions intended to subsist the troops during the culminating phase of the campaign and could not be touched in the interim. While they were in transit, the troops would have to be fed from a chain of way-stations, many of which would be located along remote stretches of river where local purchase

¹ For a staff table of vessels, SSOs and sailings; *Ibid*, i, Appx. 2, 176-7.

² *Ibid*, i, 64.

³ *Ibid*, i, 65.

was unlikely to yield significant quantities of livestock or other fresh foodstuffs. The Camel Corps was certain to represent a significant additional burden, as it too would need to have 100 days' rations available for the fighting phase but, unlike the whaler-borne infantry, would be incapable of moving the requisite quantities for itself. A particular difficulty was the sheer volume of *dhura* required to subsist large numbers of camels in such barren countryside, (just as Stephenson had predicted).

All this meant that huge tonnages of foodstuffs, fodder and other supplies would have to be pushed up the Nile, through a sequence of barriers to navigation. The whalers would prove themselves capable of handling most of the river obstacles forward of Wādī Halfā, although passing them through chokepoints proved frustratingly slow. An additional difficulty overlooked in the planning was that the banks of the Nile were often so high as to impede the effectiveness of the whalers' masts and sails. Unhappily for the 'Tommies' there was always the oar. In terms of the wider logistic task facing Wood, the troop-carrying whalers would be of little utility, if nothing else because they would be arriving so late. The first of them would reach Wādī Halfā on 14 October, meaning that Wood had a six-week window up to that point in which he would have only local river craft available to him.¹ At some point after that, he could look ahead to the river becoming unnavigable in places. Through the good offices of the Mudir of Dongola, he wasted no time in buying up all the local river craft available between Merowe and Wādī Halfā.² This produced 50 *nuggars*, twin-masted sail-boats, each capable of carrying about 8-tons of supplies. The 68 Nubian boats purchased north of Wādī Halfā were smaller, less robust and more problematic, not least because the local men best qualified to handle them were reluctant to journey south. Only 54 of the 68 had been passed through the Second Cataract before it became unnavigable which, at a capacity of 3-tons apiece, gave the commissaries an additional 162-ton lift, to supplement the 400-tons which could be collectively carried by the *nuggars*. When at last, from mid-October onwards, the whalers began arriving in numbers, Wood purloined 90 of them to help with the logistic effort on the Second and Third Cataracts. There were 36 government steamers on the Nile north of Wādī Halfā, two of which, the armed patrol vessels *Nasif-el-Kheir* and *Gizeh*, Wood successfully passed through the Second Cataract.³ The two upcountry stretches of railway, the nine miles from Aswan to Philae, and the 33 miles from Wādī Halfā to Sarras, were taken over by the Royal Engineers and by hook or by crook kept operational, although Wolseley's plan to extend the line 20 miles beyond Sarras could not, for want of materiel, be effected before the bulk of the expedition had passed through to the south.⁴

The provision of sufficient camels was to prove a headache for the transport staff. It was not just a question of buying animals; the complete span of their task also took in the provision of native drivers, riding-saddles, pack-saddles and netting for baggage, all of which proved harder to come by than expected. Prior to being superseded, Stephenson had got the enterprise off to a good start by wiring the British

¹ Ibid, i, 72-3.

² Ibid, i, 71-2.

³ Ibid, i, 72.

⁴ Ibid, i, 68-73 (logistics and water transport) and 73-6 (rail transport).

resident in Aden, to request the services of 500 camel-drivers. Eventually 590 men would be enlisted at 18 rupees *per diem* and found. Together with the 300 camels Stephenson had asked for, the Adeni contingent was shipped to Kosseir on Egypt's Red Sea coast, where it was met and organized by Lieutenant Edmund Bartellot of the Royal Fusiliers. A march of about 120 miles brought the Adenis onto the lines of communication at Keneh.¹ The officers of the transport staff found them to be dutiful and willing workers. It was normal to put one driver in charge of three baggage-camels, so that 500 men was far too small a number to meet the overall requirement. It was intended that the shortfall be made up with Egyptians or Dongolāwī Sudanese, although, in the event, there was no great rush for the work and the proportion of genuinely experienced camel-handlers was low. It transpired that many of the local Esneh and Aswan men had been press-ganged by their respective mudirs, with the result that a high incidence of desertion ensued. Others proved bone idle and could not be trusted to do work for which the generally reliable Adenis were being less well paid. The contrast between the imported drivers and the locals was highlighted in the official report penned by Lieutenant Colonel G. A. Furse, the expedition's director of transport: 'A smart boy from Aden was worth a dozen of the latter [Esneh and Aswan Egyptians]. Always cheerful and ready to work, with a supreme contempt for the natives of Egypt, these Aden drivers gave satisfaction to everybody, and their willingness to work was attested by every officer who had anything to do with them during the expedition.'² When eventually the Mudir of Dongola was asked to provide men in the south, his officials fielded a high preponderance of old men and boys.

There were a number of patterns of camel-saddle in use in Egypt, but such was the scale of the sudden demand for them that Furse's department could only adopt those patterns which were easy and swift of manufacture. A contract was placed for 2,506 lightweight riding-saddles, lashed together with rawhide, but there was considerable uncertainty as to the date by which they could be delivered. It was often the case that by the time a consignment of saddles reached Aswan, where the majority of the riding-camels were being assembled, that many of the lashings had tightened in the sun and had been severed by the wooden edges. Fortunately it proved easy enough to repair the damage with telegraph binding wire. Generally, the riding-saddle was found to suit its purpose well. The same could not be said of the regulation pack-saddle, the only design the Ordnance Store Department was capable of mass-producing at speed. It was too easily damaged and, worse, was inclined to press on the hips and loins of the animal and, 'after many hours of continuous travelling generate severe galls.' Writing in July 1885, six months after Stewart's operations in the Bayūda had run their course, Colonel Furse recommended that no more saddles of this pattern should be manufactured. By the time the Nile Expedition had drawn to a close, some 7,990 camels had been purchased to support the enterprise, at an average price of £13 6s 11d apiece. Many of these animals were used in portaging duties and never left

¹ Ibid, i, Appx. 10, 195.

² Lt. Col. G. A. Furse, *Report of the Director of Transport on the Formation and Working of the Land Transport of the Nile Expeditionary Force, 1884-5*, dated 12 Jul. 85; Ibid, i, 195-207.

Upper Egypt; so that when in due course the crunch came, there were too few available at the front.¹

5.9.3 Wolseley Moves Up

Having done everything possible in Cairo, the C-in-C and his staff left the capital on 27 September. At the instigation of the British diplomatic representatives, the Egyptian government had taken the precaution of vesting Wolseley with authority over Gordon: amongst his papers was a secret khedival *firman* which relieved Gordon of his duties and appointed Wolseley in his stead.² At this juncture the leading element in the expedition was 1st Royal Sussex which, thanks to Stephenson's foresight, had arrived at Dongola by *nuggar* a week earlier.³ Sir Herbert Stewart had gone on ahead of the staff, had married up with the leading companies of the Mounted Infantry and took command at Dongola on 29 September, only two days after the C-in-C departed Cairo. Wolseley and his entourage would be four days in transit to Assiut by rail, and a further four days in transit from Assiut to Wādī Halfā by steamer, arriving there on 5 October 1884. Hartington's relentless harrying of Gladstone having finally had an effect, the journey gave Wolseley plenty of time to ponder HMG's strategic direction. It is from the document cited below that Wolseley had to derive the contemporaneous equivalent of a National Strategic Aim and infer a Military Strategic Objective. As would still be the case today the selection of Decisive Conditions, or lines of operation, appropriate to the attainment of the Campaign Objective and Campaign End-state was a matter for the theatre commander.

My Lord

Before you leave Cairo, her Majesty's Government think it desirable that you should receive general instructions as to the course which you are to pursue in connection with the affairs of the Soudan. The primary object of the expedition up the Valley of the Nile is to bring away General Gordon and Colonel Stewart from Khartoum. [The previous sentence constitutes an articulation of the National Strategic Aim].⁴ When that object has been secured no further offensive operations of any kind are to be undertaken. Although you are not precluded from advancing as far as Khartoum should you consider such a step essential to secure the safe retreat of General Gordon and Colonel Stewart, you should bear in mind that her Majesty's Government is desirous to limit the sphere of your military operations as much as possible. They rely on you, therefore, not to advance further southwards than is absolutely necessary in

¹ *Report of the Director of Transport*, 12 Jul. 85; *Ibid*, i, 203-4.

² Wolseley, journal entry 25 Sep. 84; see Preston (ed.), *Relief of Gordon*, 20.

³ Colvile, OH, i, 89.

⁴ There was nothing fit to surprise Wolseley here; his memorandum to Hartington of 15 Sep. 84 incorporated a passage which ran, 'Whilst we hope and have every reason to hope, that events will turn out as we anticipate, we must take care not only to avoid disaster, but the failure to accomplish *the one great and sole object of such an expedition....namely the relief of General Gordon and Colonel Stewart*, who, as well as I can ascertain, are now closely besieged in Khartum [sic].'

order to attain the primary object of the expedition. You will endeavour to place yourself in communication with General Gordon as soon as possible. In respect to all political matters, you will communicate with Her Majesty's Government and receive their instructions through the Consul General in Cairo. You are aware that the policy of her Majesty's Government is that Egyptian rule in the Soudan should cease. [This constitutes the first reference to the Desired Outcome, which also receives considerable amplification in subsequent paragraphs]. It is desirable that you should receive general instructions on two points which necessarily arise in connection with the method of carrying this policy into execution. These are (1) the steps to be taken to insure the safe retreat of the Egyptian troops and the civil employés; (2) the policy to be adopted in respect of the future government of the Soudan, and especially of Khartoum. The negotiations with the tribes for endeavouring to secure the safe retreat of the garrison at Kassala may most conveniently be treated from Suakin and Massowah. You need not, therefore, take any steps in connection with this branch of the subject. The positions of the garrisons in Darfour, the Bahr-el-Gazelle and Equatorial Provinces renders it impossible that you should take any action which would facilitate their retreat without extending your operations far beyond the sphere which her Majesty's Government is prepared to sanction. As regards the Sennaar garrison, Her Majesty's Government is not prepared to sanction the despatch of an expedition up the Nile in order to insure its retreat.

From the last telegram from General Gordon, there is reason to hope that he has already taken steps to withdraw the Egyptian portion of the Sennaar garrison.

You will use your best endeavours to ensure the safe retreat of the Egyptian troops which constitute the Khartoum garrison and of such of their civil employés, together with their families, as may wish to return to Egypt. [In the previous sentence Hartington stretches the National Strategic Aim to include the extrication not merely of Gordon and Stewart but of everybody else in khedival employ plus dependents].

[From this point on Hartington begins his amplification of the Desired Outcome]. As regards the future government of the Soudan, and especially of Khartoum, Her Majesty's Government would be glad to see a government at Khartoum which, so far as all the matters connected with the internal administration of the country are concerned, would be wholly independent of Egypt. The Egyptian government would be prepared to pay a reasonable subsidy to any Chief, or number of chiefs, who would be sufficiently powerful to maintain order along the Valley of the Nile from Wady Halfa to Khartoum, and who would agree to the following conditions: 1. To remain at peace with Egypt and to repress any raids on Egyptian territory. 2. To encourage trade with Egypt. 3. To prevent and discourage by all possible means any expeditions for the sale of and capture of slaves. You are authorised to conclude any arrangements which fulfil these general conditions. The main difficulty will consist in the selection of an individual, or a number of individuals, having

*sufficient authority to maintain order. You will, of course, bear in mind that any ruler established south of Wady Halfa will have to rely solely on his own strength in order to maintain his position. I have already mentioned that under certain conditions the Egyptian Government would be prepared to pay a moderate subsidy in order to secure tranquillity and fairly good government in the Valley of the Nile. Beyond the adoption of this measure, neither Her Majesty's Government nor the Egyptian government are prepared to assume any responsibility whatsoever for the government of the Nile Valley south of Wady Halfa.*¹

To Hartington's credit his letter constitutes a perfectly competent articulation of the political direction any military commander would seek. Of note is that it is quite impossible to derive more than one Campaign Objective from the political direction. Indeed, all other variations on a theme are expressly closed down; a point of the first importance, the significance of which will be highlighted later.

Wolseley steamed into Wādī Halfā aboard the steam-cutter *Ferooz* on 5 October, to learn that the steamer *Abbas* had foundered in attempting to get downriver from Khartoum, with the result that Colonel Hammill Stewart and everybody else aboard had been treacherously murdered by Shaikh Sulaimān wad Gamr of the Mānāsir. 'Poor Stewart', Wolseley wrote in his journal that evening, 'his loss just at this moment is a national one. A fine chivalrous fellow to die at the hands of a murderer. May that murderer fall into my hands.'² He had been reunited with Wood during the course of the day and reserved the greater part of his journal entry for a long and vitriolic attack on his subordinate's vanity and ambition. Although there were four generals at Wādī Halfa – Wolseley, Earle, Buller and Wood – they did not even now, in the first week of October, have a brigade of troops or a whaler between them.

In the meantime Sir Charles Wilson had departed Cairo by train, on 23 September, bound for Assiut. He then steamed upriver, to reach Wādī Halfā on 3 October, two days ahead of Wolseley. He stayed only one night, before entraining the following morning for the 33-mile journey to Sarras. From there it was an onerous seven-day camel ride to Dongola, which he reached on 11 October.³ He was warmly received by Sir Herbert Stewart and his staff, who had been in situ for the past 12 days. As an experienced Arabist, capable of recognizing every nuanced slight, Wilson was offended by the intentionally insulting manner evinced by Muṣṭafa Yāwar Pasha, not that the mudir's want of civility had been lost on Stewart either.⁴ Wilson found telegraphic orders from Wolseley awaiting him, to the effect that he was to go upriver and learn what he could of the *Abbas* disaster. He set off on 12 October aboard the steamer *Nasif-el-Kheir*, accompanied by 3 other officers and a 25-man escort from 1st Royal Sussex. Three days later he overnighted with Kitchener at Debbah and the following morning set off for Merowe. Passing Ambukol and Korti en route, he passed

¹ Hartington to Wolseley, 9 Oct 84, quoted in the *Standard*, 28 Oct. 1884.

² Wolseley, journal entry 5 Oct. 84; see Preston (ed.), *Relief of Gordon*, 31.

³ Watson, *Life of Wilson*, 276-7.

⁴ For Wilson's account of their first meeting; *Ibid*, 277-9.

into a riparian no-man's land and reached his destination on 18 October. Subsequently he pushed on another 20 miles to Belal, where the foot of the 4th Cataract precluded any further progress.¹ Now within 70 miles of the wreck of the *Abbas*, Wilson questioned non-aligned locals to glean what he could. Having elicited no hint that any Europeans had survived, he turned about for Ambukol, from whence he would be able to telegraph his findings through to Wolseley at Wādī Halfā. His message incorporated a request that he be allowed to remain at Ambukol, where he felt certain he would be much more beneficially located for intelligence gathering purposes, and which he considered was safe enough for the present. Somewhat to Wilson's annoyance, Wolseley declined his advice and ordered that the party should return to the safety of Dongola.² It might be usefully observed in passing that this adventurous episode hardly bespeaks the timorous Wilson later portrayed by his critics.

On 11 October Wolseley's headquarters issued telegraphic orders detailing the composition of the fighting force to be concentrated on Shendy:³

Royal Engineers	50
19th Hussars (3 squadrons)	360
Mounted Infantry	400
Camel Corps	1,050
Royal Marine Light Infantry	100
1st Bn. Royal Irish Regiment	550
1st Bn. Royal Sussex Regiment	550
1st Bn. Black Watch	550
1st Bn. Berkshire Regiment	550
1st Bn. Royal West Kent Regiment	550
2nd Bn. Essex Regiment	550
1st Bn. Gordon Highlanders	550
British Camel Battery (6 screw-guns)	50
Egyptian Camel Battery (6 screw-guns)	50

5,910

In addition to these units, 1st South Staffords would be left at Dongola and 2nd Duke of Cornwall's Light infantry (DCLI) at Berber. A week later, on the 19th, Wolseley took the decision to concentrate Stewart's mounted troops at Debbah, (337 miles upstream of Wādī Halfā), against the eventuality of a camel-borne dash across the Bayūda becoming necessary. It was planned that Stewart would have 2,250 men at his disposal, comprising the 19th Hussars, four camel regiments, two camel-borne batteries, Nos. 9 and 11 Transport Companies, the camel bearer-company and a 100-bed 'moveable field hospital'. In addition to 2,250 riding camels, there would be

¹ Ibid, 282-3.

² Wilson to his wife, undated but Oct. 84, quoted in Watson, *Life of Wilson*, 284.

³ Ibid, i, 103.

around 2,000 baggage-camels.¹ On 26 October a general order was issued which formally assigned names to the composite camel regiments: the Heavy Camel Regiment (HCR), the Light Camel Regiment (LCR), the Guards Camel Regiment (GCR) and the Mounted Infantry Camel Regiment (MICR). It was not for another two days that the first of the Camel Corps detachments from England took over their mounts.²

On 28 October Wolseley left Buller in charge at Wādī Halfā and departed for Dongola. With the exception of MICR and 1st Royal Sussex, the rest of his force was still strung out behind him. At Wādī Halfā were 1st South Staffords, two companies of 2nd Essex and the newly arrived *voyageurs*. The 19th Hussars, the camel-borne batteries and the transport and medical companies were echeloned in marching detachments along the east bank of the Nile from Aswan to Dongola. Another two companies of 2nd Essex were in transit on the river between Aswan and Wādī Halfā. There were 2½ battalions, (1st Black Watch, 2nd DCLI and the other half-battalion of 2nd Essex), camped at Aswan, while still waiting to be called forward from Cairo were 1st Gordons, 1st Royal Irish, 1st Berkshire and 1st Royal West Kents. Three of the as yet un-mounted Camel Corps regiments were still in transit between Cairo and Aswan.³

If Wolseley had long since been compelled to abandon any idea of relieving Khartoum by mid-November, his correspondence with his wife serves usefully to identify the revised target date he set himself once he was in Egypt and his preparations were in full swing. Writing from Cairo on 13 September, which happened to be the second anniversary of Tel-el-Kebir, he had linked his last great triumph with what he eagerly imagined would be his next:

*This day two years ago, thank God, ended brilliantly. I can remember my feeling of growing anxiety all through the hours from 1.00 am until I stood on the bridge at Tel-el-Kebir, with a defeated army flying from us in all directions. If I am equally blessed, I ought to shake hands with Gordon near Khartoum, about 31st January next.*⁴

Without a hint of irony, he went on to exhort Lady Louisa to, 'Remember that Khartoum by the Nile is over 1700 miles from Cairo.'

Two days after Wolseley left Wādī Halfā, the calendar turned over to November, at which point 85 days had elapsed since the Vote of Credit. Something around 85% of the force had not commenced the 666 (in reality 866) miles of Wolseley's Option Three. It will be recalled that his April options paper had said nothing about 85 days being required to get less than a fifth of the force to the start point. Four of nine infantry battalions had not yet left Cairo, 75% of the infantry were no further south than Aswan, while three quarters of the Camel Corps had not so much as stroked a camel. It was some consolation that, according to Wolseley's revised timetable, there were still 92 days to go. According to his campaign estimate of

¹ Ibid, i, 108.

² Ibid, i, 109.

³ Ibid, i, 110.

⁴ Wolseley to his wife, 13 Sep. 85; see Arthur (ed.), *Wolseley Letters*, 119.

April, however, food and artillery ammunition¹ would run out in Khartoum 77 days too soon for the revised timetable to be considered tenable. Stephenson could be forgiven for reflecting that marching from Suakin to Berber took a fortnight at worst. If Gordon could somehow eke out his rations, to allow Wolseley's 92 remaining days to run their course, the city might yet be saved, but the margin was tight and only timely decisions and the highest standard of Campaign Management would suffice to pull it off.

5.10 LEAD INTO CHAPTER 6

The next chapter will analyse Campaign Management inside the Sudan, with particular emphasis on understanding Wolseley's thought processes and the ways in which he intended to develop his operations through to a successful Campaign End-state. Again it will be helpful to draw on *ADP Operations* for guidance on the campaign management process.

*Campaign management (assess and execute) integrates, coordinates, synchronizes and prioritises the execution of activities within operations and assesses their progress. Adversaries' responses will inevitably affect the course of a campaign or operation, as will those of other actors. Assessing the course of the campaign, then acting quickly, in order to modify the plan to meet objectives in a new light, is the essence of successful campaign management.*²

Chapter 6 will also expose for the first time the existence of what this research labels 'the Grand Conception': a second, secret and politically unendorsed Campaign Objective, so over-ambitious that it would cause Wolseley's powers of command first to falter, then to founder. Montgomery's 1946 itemisation of the principles of war would identify the 'Master Principle' as 'Selection and Maintenance of the Aim'. It was (and remains) a simple premise which, even if it was not enshrined within high-Victorian doctrine in quite such strident terms, was nonetheless as relevant to the conduct of operations in Wolseley's day as in Montgomery's. Unfortunately the Grand Conception, illegitimate and fated never to come remotely close to realisation, would serve only as a distraction, just as the Master Principle foretells.

¹ The Khartoum arsenal was capable of manufacturing small arms ammunition, albeit not at any great rate.

² *ADP Operations*, Ch. 7, para. 0713, 7-6.

Chapter 6

FAILURE OF THE CAMPAIGN MANAGEMENT PROCESS

6.1 THE CAMPAIGN'S KEY DECISION-POINT

It became increasingly apparent, as the autumn wore on, that things were moving too slowly on the Nile, if the late-January timetable was to be adhered to. The desert crossing to Metemmeh represented the only means by which progress could be accelerated. Although Wolseley had always had the contingency in mind, Buller's private correspondence would suggest that his chief was slow to arrive at a committed decision to throw part of his force across the shortcut. It may have been the amount of reputational capital which Wolseley had invested in the whaler scheme, coupled with the extent and the bitterness of the opposition to it, which precluded his committing to a desert march at the correct decision-point. It is after all inherently improbable that an officer of Wolseley's experience could ever straightforwardly lose track of time and space. Buller was the first to break ranks and urge that the whaler-borne phase of operations be terminated short of the Great Bend. In a letter home, written from Wādī Halfā on 8 November, he refers to an important item of military correspondence he had penned the previous day:

I still do not think it is possible for us to be concentrated at Debbah or Ambukol, which latter Wolseley now rather seems to favour, before Christmas. I wrote Wolseley yesterday proposing the following plan. Concentrate at Ambukol, and later perhaps at Abu Dom. From those two places roads lead to Shendi [sic]. Move one regiment on camels to Abu Halfa, which is the junction of the two roads, and about half way to Shendi; make a fort there and fill it with provisions. Then, based on that fort, move across to Shendi and thence up the Nile to Khartoum. I think we should do an advance quicker that way than all the way round by Abū-Hamed and Berber. The objection is that we should have to reduce our fighting force to 3,000 men at the outside, and it is a question whether that is enough. I think that it should be. I have not an idea what Wolseley means to do, but I think that he must do something of that sort.¹

Wolseley left Wādī Halfā for Dongola some nine days before Buller wrote to him commending this adaptation to the campaign plan. He reached his destination on 3 November, at which point there were still only two fighting units that far forward: Colonel Vandeleur's 1st Royal Sussex and the larger part of MICR, which had come up on camels. Having lost its commanding officer to sunstroke,² MICR was now under the command of Major the Hon. George Gough, 14th Hussars. It was not until 9.15 *am* on 6 November that 1st South Staffords, under Lieutenant Colonel Phillip Eyre, became

¹ Quoted in Melville, *Life of Buller*, 207.

² Marling, *Rifleman and Hussar*, 124.

the first of the infantry battalions to embark aboard whalers at Gemai and depart for the front.¹

Wolseley's first political priority, now that he was well inside the Sudan, was to secure the wholehearted cooperation of the Mudir of Dongola. Stewart and Wilson, had found him arrogant, offhand and obstructive.² Wilson was appalled by his despotic 'Turkish style'³ of governance. Forewarned of the difficulty, Wolseley had resolved to make early recourse to flattery. Having borrowed the KCMG from Buller's dress uniform, he proceeded to invest the mudir as an honorary knight of the realm.⁴ 'Sir Muṣṭafa' seemed much more ready to deal meaningfully with the conqueror of Egypt than with mere colonels, and for a while Wolseley allowed himself to believe that the expedition could now count on the unstinting support of the civil power. Now it was just a question of waiting for the balance of the troops to come up.

6.2 CAMPAIGN REVIEW: WĀDĪ HALFĀ 17 NOVEMBER

Buller's letter of 7 November took four days to make its way to Dongola. Although Wolseley did not immediately buy into the idea of terminating the whaler-borne advance at Ambukol or Korti, he was galvanised by unsatisfactory progress reports into returning to Wādī Halfā to investigate the causes of delay. 'Something is wrong', he confided to his journal, 'and I must examine into it myself. This is a horrid bore.'⁵ Accompanied only by two officers and a native servant, Wolseley left Dongola aboard his steam launch at 7.25 *am* on Thursday 13 November. Four hours later the party transferred to camels to begin a hard-riding 4-day desert adventure. They regained civilisation at Sarras, at 9.00 *pm* on the evening of 16 November, where they transferred to a train for the final leg of the journey.⁶ There was a halt at Gemai to take on water, presenting Wolseley with an ideal opportunity to consult with Butler. Why were the troops not moving south of the Second Cataract in greater numbers? Why were the companies that *had* embarked moving so slowly? Butler reported that he had despatched more than 200 boats already, but was able to point to more than 200 others waiting idly, not 60 yards from where he and Wolseley were talking.⁷ The problem with critical mass evidently did not lie this side of the Second Cataract, where there were no more troops to embark, but somewhere to the north. The reasons for this Wolseley would have to establish with the chief of staff, when he reached Wādī Halfā. Butler was quick to attribute the unexpectedly slow progress of the embarked troops to the extra weight imposed on the boats by the QMG's branch. His original conception had called for the whalers to carry 100 days' worth of rations for the embarked troops only, but in the meantime no other provision had been made for the camel-borne troops. The commissaries' only plan was that the additional burden would have to be distributed across Butler's flotilla. As a result individual boats were

¹ Colvile, OH, i, 249.

² For Stewart's assessment; Ibid, i, 91.

³ Watson, *Life of Wilson*, 285.

⁴ Wolseley, journal entry 4 Nov. 84; see Preston (ed.), *Relief of Gordon*, 59.

⁵ Wolseley, journal entry 4 Nov. 84; Ibid, 64.

⁶ Wolseley to his wife, 17 Nov. 84; see Arthur (ed.), *Wolseley Letters*, 130.

⁷ Butler, *Autobiography*, 281-2.

now carrying anything up to 126 days' worth of rations; in other words the boat crews were pulling 26% more weight upriver than had ever been intended. In addition the number of embarked personnel per boat had been reduced from twelve to ten. This had come about as a result of a decision not to place two *voyageurs* permanently aboard each of the boats, but to keep them concentrated in groups at the cataracts, in order that each such party could master the vagaries of a particular stretch of river. Butler felt sure that if they could agree to lighten the load, by even a thousand pounds, that the embarked companies would start flying upriver.¹ He also made clear his strongly held perception that there was a good deal of obstructionism and apathy in play on the lines of communication.² Wolseley noted his concerns and departed for Wādī Halfā.

The army commander spent Monday 17 November in conference with Buller and Brackenbury. The progress reports from the staff indicated that to date some 212 whalers had departed Gemai with embarked troops and stores; and that another 222 were waiting for units to come up and take them over, of which 52 were undergoing repairs to minor damage incurred in transit.³ The most significant item on the agenda was an impromptu one: a long letter from Gordon had arrived at Dongola three days earlier, having spent only 10 days in transit from Khartoum. Wolseley's military secretary lost no time in telegraphing a synopsis to Wādī Halfā and Cairo. Baring read the telegram on the morning of the fifteenth and immediately had it forwarded to Granville at the Foreign Office. It was rushed across Whitehall the same day, with the result that the Secretary of State for War got to read it at least 24 hours ahead of the army commander in the field.⁴

Gordon's letter was dated 4 November and began by referring to the fact that messages from Wolseley, dated 20 September, and Kitchener, dated 14 October, had found their way through to him only the previous day.⁵ Irritated to learn that Gordon had been unable to read his letter, because he had for some unstated reason sent his cipher-books downriver aboard the *Abbas*, Wolseley fulminated into his journal, 'That any man could have been so idiotic is to me a puzzle.' Gordon had not long since learned of the loss of the *Abbas* and went on to reflect on the sad demise of Stewart and Power. On the reverse of his letter he had provided a list of the 19 Greeks who could likewise be presumed lost. There was also a sketch map showing in very general terms how the enemy was disposed.⁶ By far the most critical piece of news conveyed by the letter was Gordon's estimate of just how long he would be able to sustain the defence of the city. 'We can hold out 40 days with ease, after that it will be difficult', ran the operative sentence. This should have made it abundantly clear that Wolseley's 31 January timeline could no longer be regarded as tenable. Gordon's remarks should by extension have dictated that all the C-in-C's thinking now be focussed on reaching Khartoum as close to mid-December as possible. It should also have been apparent

¹ Butler, *Campaign of the Cataracts*, 204.

² Butler, *Autobiography*, 284.

³ Colvile, OH, i, 124.

⁴ See Egypt No. 1/85, 98-100.

⁵ For the full text of the letter see Colvile, OH, i, 122-3.

⁶ Ibid, i, 123, where the map can be seen.

that this would demand precisely the sort of dash across the Bayūda which Buller had commended in his letter of 7 November. Other important news was that the Mahdī had come up from Rahad, to direct the siege in person, and that the main enemy strength lay to the west and south. Gordon also went on to offer simple, unequivocal advice on which route Wolseley should follow: 'I should take the road from Ambukkol [sic] to Metemmeh, where my steamers await you.'¹

That the news from Khartoum was of great operational import was so apparent that Hartington immediately sent Wolseley a one-line telegram enquiring, 'Should like to know how information in Gordon's letter affects your plans, also what announcement safe or desirable to make.'² The Secretary of State would not get a reply until the 22nd of the month, almost a week later, which was the day after Wolseley got back to Dongola. 'Yours of the 15th', ran his response. 'News from Gordon makes no change in my plans, but it seems to indicate the almost impossibility [sic] of his relief without fighting.'³

Hartington's telegram had been sent two days before Wolseley's 8-hour meeting at Wādī Halfā with Buller and Brackenbury. It is inconceivable in the circumstances that the chief of staff's Bayūda proposal did not come under consideration. It is no less clear, as evinced in Wolseley's reply to Hartington, that the proposition was rebutted in favour of proceeding via the Great Bend. It appears that as far as Wolseley was concerned, the logistic advantages of the river route still outweighed any countervailing considerations of time and space – thinking which on the face of it would appear to be illogical – until, that is, the existence of a secret Grand Conception known only to the army commander is recognized and factored in. The most important decision to emerge from the conference had two strands. The first of these was that Korti would now become the expedition's forward concentration area. The second was that the staff would continue feeding whalers upriver, until all 600 boats destined for service south of Wādī Halfā had dropped off their embarked troops at Korti. Coupled with 2,500 cavalry and camel-mounted troops, this would provide a fighting echelon of around 8,500 men. At the time this decision (or rather non-decision) was taken, there were only 1,355 men at Dongola. Working back along the lines of communication, from south to north, there were 970 men in transit between Dal and Dongola; 1,955 somewhere between Gemai and Dal; 1,895 at Wādī Halfā, Sarras or Gemai; 1,379 making their way from Aswan to Wādī Halfā; 1,840 at Aswan; 500 traveling between Assiut and Aswan; and a last 75 who had not even departed Assiut.⁴ This represented an all-up total of 9,969 men.

Instead of moving on to forge a new and bold plan, fit to meet a new and urgent timeline, the rest of the meeting was dedicated to discussing the causes of delay up to that point. It transpired that the principal difficulty had been inadequate stockpiles of coal at various way-stations above the Second Cataract. Wolseley reflected on the reasons for the mistake and its operational implications.

¹ Ibid, i, 122.

² Hartington to Wolseley, 5.00 pm 15 Nov 84; see Egypt No. 1/1885, 100.

³ Wolseley to Hartington, 3.05 pm 22 Nov 84; Ibid,

⁴ Colvile, OH, i, 129-130.

The coal question had never been looked into by Buller who assumed that Dormer had made all the necessary arrangements before he, Buller, had arrived in the country. Dormer it seems had made very few arrangements & those few were not very good. However Buller is of course to blame for not having made certain that all was right on this most vital point. All was wrong hence the delay. I blame myself too, for although I trust Buller fully, I should not have relied upon my trust in him on such a vital question, & ought personally to have gone into it. I know from my own personal experience when I was a staff officer, how inconvenient and difficult it was to serve a general who wished to command, & to be his own staff officer at the same time. At the beginning I told Buller I looked to him for all details which I unreservedly left in his hands & that I had no intention of keeping a dog and barking for myself. The result has been in this one respect unfortunate. However the difficulty is now over, but instead of having the Army concentrated at Debbah-Ambukol about the middle of December, it cannot possibly be so until the 7th or 10th January.¹

The 17 November meeting represented a perfect opportunity to review and revise a faltering plan and yet Wolseley, distracted perhaps by the self-inflicted demands of his Grand Conception, seems to have failed to grasp both the compelling nature of the problem before him and the fact that it allowed of only one solution: moving fewer, less well-provisioned soldiers over a faster, immediately accessible axis of advance. It is inconceivable that he left Wādī Halfā believing that there was still time aplenty to journey to Khartoum via the Great Bend, as the most rudimentary calculations must have shown that he needed to be in Khartoum in four weeks' time, or if Gordon's luck held, six weeks at the most. If this was not achievable, and it was not, as only two-fifths of the force had yet reached Wādī Halfā or points beyond,² then it would be vital to strain the expedition's every sinew to get a viable fighting force to the city as soon as possible thereafter. Everything cried out that this was a vital decision-point and yet the army commander set out for Dongola that evening without having made one.³

Current British doctrine counsels against the dangers of 'following the herd' and 'groupthink', before then proceeding to urge mitigating processes such as wargaming or the utilisation of an empowered 'red-team' whose business is devil's advocacy. In the present instance, however, it is clear that Buller had not fallen into the groupthink trap: far from it. In fact he had framed the problem perfectly, in a way in which the army commander, on the face of it, would appear not to have done. But such a contention underestimates Wolseley's intellect. More likely is that some other factor was now in play.

A number of routine but nonetheless important directives would be promulgated in the aftermath of the Wādī Halfā meeting. For reasons of internal command and control, Colonel Eyre had not unreasonably been attempting to operate

¹ Wolseley, journal entry 17 Nov. 84; see Preston (ed.), *Relief of Gordon*, 67.

² Colvile, OH, i, 128.

³ Chapter 6 of ADP *Operations* is instructive on the art of making command decisions; see in particular paras. 0601-0605 inclusive.

the South Staffords by 'wings' or half-battalions. This was judged to be one of the factors contributing to slow progress. The new guidance issued by Wood was that a group of four boats, the tactical equivalent of a half-company, was to be regarded as the optimal working unit. A mandatory daily routine for embarked troops was also stipulated. It was reiterated that the rations on board the boats were on no account to be broken open this side of Korti. Instead embarked troops would be issued with 15 days' worth of consumable rations at Sarras, 20 days' worth at Sarkamatto and 5 days' worth at Abu Fatmeh.¹ Other directives sought to ensure that Camel Corps units paid all due care and attention to the condition of their animals: the rate of advance was to be regulated at not more than 120 miles a week, while commanding officers were left in no doubt that they would be held accountable for any avoidable losses.²

6.3 WOLSELEY RETURNS TO DONGOLA

Wolseley and his aides returned to Dongola on Friday 21 November, to find that General Earle had come up in their absence and that smallpox had broken out in the Royal Sussex. Earle had ordered Stewart to move MICR a few miles upriver to Khandak, to prevent any possibility of the contagion spreading, while infantry companies coming upriver were ordered to proceed straight through to the new camp. If Wolseley appeared to Buller to have very firmly rebutted the idea of an overland advance, there is an indication in his journal, from around a week later, either that he changed his mind fairly quickly, or that Buller had got the wrong end of the stick. The entry in question ran, 'I have telegraphed home about forming a small Naval Brigade...I shall send two gardeners [sic – Gardners] with them and may possibly send them on camels across desert to Shendy from Ambukol to man the guns in Gordon's steamers there.'³ It would appear that Wolseley's insistence that they persevere with the river route had the effect of convincing his chief of staff that he intended going *only by the river*, whereas what he actually meant was that he *did not intend only to go overland*; not at all the same thing. If there was confusion on this point, then the blame rests with Wolseley, as the onus to make future intent plain to the staff has always rested with the commander in person. If, as a function of a fixation with secrecy, he was disingenuously concealing some part of his intent, then he can only be regarded as doubly culpable.

Within a few days of Wolseley's return to Dongola, the staff had been able to fit a timetable around the army's forward concentration at Korti. It was based on the transit times of the leading whaler-borne unit, 1st South Staffords, and allowed 10 days for a battalion to get from Aswan to Gemai and embark all of its companies; 18 days to get from Gemai to Dal; 12 days to transit 152 miles of relatively clear water between Dal and Dongola; and 7 days to cover the remaining 132 miles between Dongola and Korti. This aggregated total of 47 days' transit between Aswan and Korti enabled the staff projections that 1st South Staffords would reach Korti on 15 December; 2nd Essex on 30 December; 2nd DCLI on 31 December; 1st Black Watch on

¹ Colville, OH, i, 126-7.

² Ibid, i, 127.

³ Wolseley, journal entry 24 Nov. 84; see Preston (ed.), *Relief of Gordon*, 71.

5 January; 1st Gordons on 9 January; 1st Royal Irish on 14 January; 1st Royal West Kents on 18 January; and 1st Camerons on 22 January.¹ Because the camel-mounted regiments were all capable of making faster progress than the boats, 22 January could be fixed as the date by which the concentration of the army's fighting echelon would be complete. These broadly accurate projections did not bode well for Gordon, whose most recent message had suggested that the game would be up around a month earlier.

When Wolseley wrote up his journal on the evening of 29 November, he penned an unduly optimistic passage which ran, 'I am now very hopeful of being able to do a great deal by negotiation & possibly ending the business without any fighting.'² The point is made without any supporting context, but by cross-referencing with his telegraphic correspondence with Baring of the same date, we learn that the reason for this otherwise curious entry is that a messenger sent to Khartoum, in reply to Gordon's letter, had been captured and held in the enemy's camp for four days, before making his escape. The burst of optimism was based on the courier's account of his adventures:

Mahdi's troops suffering from disease; food very dear; Arabs deserting, but Kordofan men faithful to him. Gordon sent to Mahdi inviting him, if he were the real Mahdi, to dry up Nile and cross over. Five hundred regulars recently went over to Gordon; the regulars still with Mahdi are discontented. On 14th he saw attack made on Khartoum between Blue and White Nile; it was repulsed; Mahdi, who was looking on, very angry because it had been made without his orders.³

While Gordon's journals show that there were elements of truth in the report, taken in the round it did not constitute an accurate portrayal of the situation at Khartoum, where the Mahdists were now very much in the ascendant.

6.4 DIVIDING THE ARMY

Wolseley's journal entry for the first day of December confirms how heavily the slow progress upriver was now weighing on his mind. 'How my hopes have been disappointed', he wrote, 'as to the time when I should have been in a position to do something. I expected to have been at Ambukol by this date with a force large enough to have walked through the Monassir Country [sic] with fire and sword.'⁴ This is a reference to taking punitive action for the *Abbas* murders and is the first real indication to be found in the journal that the penny had at last dropped in respect of

¹ Colvile, OH, i, 130.

² Wolseley, journal entry 29 Nov. 84; see Preston (ed.), *Relief of Gordon*, 75.

³ Wolseley to Baring, 29 Nov. 84; Egypt No. 1/1885, 101.

⁴ Wolseley, journal entry 10 Dec. 84; see Preston (ed.), *Relief of Gordon*, 85.

time and space. At some point over the course of the next ten days, Wolseley concluded that the time had come to mount the camel-borne thrust across the Bayūda heralded by Buller more than a month earlier. That such an operation would have to involve the newly elevated Brigadier-General Stewart,¹ the four regiments of the Camel Corps and appropriately sized detachments of gunners, engineers, logisticians and medics was obvious. As yet there was no suggestion that the whaler-borne infantry battalions would do anything other than continue the journey around the Great Bend, although there was nothing to prevent their being deployed on the trans-Bayūda axis in support of the Camel Corps. On 7 December Stewart received orders to begin moving GCR and MICR from the advanced camp at Khandak to Korti, in four days' time, a distance of about 100 miles, where he could expect to be joined in short order by 1st South Staffords, 1st Royal Sussex and the army headquarters.²

Colvile states that by the time Wolseley left Dongola for Korti on 13 December, he was firmly resolved to lead a camel-borne column across the Bayūda to seize Metemmeh, there to rendezvous with Gordon's steamers.³ Wolseley's journal entry for 15 December provides the first real collateral to Colvile's assertion: 'If I can only reach Shendy safely with 1500 men on camels & with 30 days' provisions for them, I think I could tickle up the Mahdī.' In the meantime the inadvisable separation of commander and chief of staff had continued unabated, causing Buller to complain in a letter dated 18 December:

I have not seen Wolseley, except for 8 hours, for two months, and am really absolutely ignorant of his information and his plans, while he has left the working of the troop part entirely to me, and I have equipped, fed, and forwarded, or rather superintended these actions, almost absolutely without reference to him. Now I trust the time for action has come. I really do think we shall go into Khartoum without much further difficulty, but how we shall go there, I mean by what route, I am ignorant as the babe unborn. I still, though, expect we will only go with camels across the desert: I shall soon know.⁴

Once again Buller's correspondence shows that the proposed circuit of the Great Bend was deemed at the most senior level down from Wolseley to have no possible bearing on the formally assigned Campaign Objective. It is hard to know why such an extended divorce between commander and chief of staff was considered in any way desirable; Sir Evelyn Wood was running the lines of communication after all, while both Earle and Butler were hastening things along forward of Gemai. Despite the fact that Wolseley and Buller had telegraphic communications and sometimes 'talked together' over the wires,⁵ the chief of staff appears to have been caught flat-footed by a confirmed command decision to strike out across the Bayūda. It was not until 16 December, three days before the last of the whaler-borne troops were embarked at Gemai, that Buller

¹ With effect 29 Nov: Wolseley, journal entry of the same day; Ibid, 75.

² Wolseley, journal entry 7 Dec. 84; Ibid, 82.

³ Colvile, OH, i, 133.

⁴ Quoted in Melville, *Life of Buller*, 208.

⁵ Colvile, OH, i, 109.

finally got away from Wādī Halfā.¹ He was more than a week in transit and arrived at Korti on Christmas Eve.

Here a surprise awaited me. I found that Wolseley had just made up his mind to act on the lines...I sketched out to him in November last, viz. to go with the camels across the desert to Shendi, and to send the infantry by boat to Abū-Hamed and Berber.² Earle will command the force by water, and Brackenbury goes as second in command. Herbert Stewart will command the Mounted Force [sic]. Wolseley will go with it, and so do I, as fifth wheel to the coach, to command vice Stewart or Wolseley if one of them is shot. I am sorry that Wolseley did not make up his mind sooner. I could have done him much better than he will be now [sic], but he has so persistently said that he must go by water, and that he must have at least 5,000 men at Shendi, that I have been put off my idea, and have been doing my best to prepare for his. Consequently he has not here either the men, the camels or the food I should have liked to have had for the operation he proposes. However, we must do the best with what we have and risk the rest....The expedition we are going on will be severely criticised, and partially justly so, for Lord Wolseley has I think quite forgotten that I was not in touch with his mind during the last two months, and consequently that it was out of my power to follow his line of thought. Fact is, in a few words, that we are now undertaking an expedition which we have not properly provided for, but which we ought to have foreseen and fully provided for two months ago. Of course it is a bore: one does not like to do bad work, when one is conscious that one could have done better. However, I have patched it up as well as may be, and we shall do pretty well, I think. As for the Mahdī, he is a fraud, and I really do not anticipate that we shall have any fighting at all. At the same time, I anticipate that we shall have very serious difficulties, and perhaps shortness of supply. But it is a poor heart that never rejoices, and I do rejoice to see the end of the long journey, though at the same time I cannot help regretting that Wolseley did not give me the chance of doing him as well as I should have liked to, and indeed as I could have. But it is no use crying over spilt milk.³

It seems extraordinary if Buller is to be believed, and his tone appears both sincere and compelling, that Wolseley failed to notify his chief of staff and heads of department of a major operational level decision which he can be shown to have made at least as early as 12 December and which he had been contemplating for at least a fortnight before that. At least 12 invaluable days were lost in consequence, which might otherwise have been used to staff-check the commander's plan and resolve any shortfalls or deficiencies. Moreover, had the decision been timely, which is to say taken at Wādī Halfā on 17 November, the staff might have had five weeks to prepare.

¹ Ibid, i, 132.

² For the avoidance of confusion it should be noted that the final sub-clause in respect of the infantry is intended to be read as distinctly separate from the sub-clause commencing 'viz' and ending 'Shendi'.

³ Quoted in Melville, *Life of Buller*, 208-9.

The issue was not so much the availability of key elements of the fighting echelon, which was continuing to make its way to Korti by the fastest possible means, but the transport and logistic assets necessary to support a major push across the desert. The most under-resourced commodity was baggage-camels, which the headquarters staff had stopped purchasing on the basis of Wolseley's apparently firm rebuttal of Buller's 7 November proposals. It was not a shortfall which could be readily addressed in Dongola Province, where there were simply not the requisite numbers of animals available. Additionally, although a good many Sudanese had been recruited at Dongola as camel drivers, a sizeable number had deserted as soon as the animals were moved upriver, creating another significant deficiency. It was also proving impossible to acquire additional camel-saddles in any significant quantities. The most serious difficulty, however, was that of procuring and moving the great volumes of *dhura* required to feed such atypically large concentrations of camels.¹ If we accept that Buller identified the right decision-point as being 7 November or thereabouts, then the amount of lead-time squandered by Wolseley reaches the best part of seven precious weeks, time which might have been used to address all the critical logistic shortfalls described above. Ironically several of the secondary works discussed at Chapter 2 highlight the shortage of baggage-camels but happily attribute the deficiency to Buller.

6.5 WOLSELEY'S SECRET CAMPAIGN OBJECTIVE – THE 'GRAND CONCEPTION'

Save in so far as there may have been faster strategic alternatives, such as the Suakin-Berber axis, there was nothing inherently unsound about using whalers to concentrate men and supplies at Korti, in readiness for an overland thrust across the Bayūda. At the same time, the broader dictates of time and space were such that pushing boats around the Great Bend and beyond was never going to be timely enough to effect the outcome at Khartoum. By mid-December it should have been abundantly clear to Wolseley that this phase of the plan could no longer have any possible bearing on the attainment of his mission. Nonetheless, he apparently felt an irresistible compunction to send the larger part of his force via Abū-Hamed and Berber. Why was this? How could the chief of staff conclude as early as 7 November that the Bayūda route was the only tenable option and be content with aborting any further river movement, while the army commander, faced with precisely the same set of planning factors, continued to insist that a manifestly irrelevant phase of operations be persevered with?

There can be only five possible answers to this conundrum. The first is that an army commander renowned for his military acumen had failed to grasp a very basic time and space equation. This is so far-fetched a premise that it can be immediately dismissed. The second is that the army commander considered the shorter overland route to be too high-risk. If that was so, then there would have been no Desert Column and British forces could not have been within a hundred miles of Khartoum before March; it follows that this notion can likewise be dismissed. The third is that the army commander intended evacuating the Khartoum garrison along the Berber-Suakin caravan route to the sea. It is a matter of record, however, that thousands of tons of foodstuffs were being stockpiled to facilitate the garrison's extrication via Wādī Halfā

¹ Colvile, OH, i, 133.

and Aswan.¹ The fourth possibility is that the chastisement of Colonel Stewart's murderers was considered to be of such vital political importance that it needed to be undertaken at all hazards. This too is hardly likely. The fifth, final and most credible proposition is that the army commander had always had a phase of operations in mind which would not readily have commanded the Prime Minister's support: something set distinctly apart from the relief of Khartoum; something fit to feed Wolseley's burning ambition; a phase of operations he could portray as a military necessity, thereby evading any undue political interference in its execution.

If there was to be a substantially contrived phase of operations, running contrary to the political direction, then it is little wonder that Wolseley had not yet laid his cards on the table. What Buller had failed to appreciate is that his chief's insistence on pushing the whaler-borne infantry around the Great Bend had a subsidiary purpose. It did not follow that there was to be no overland push from Korti, as Buller had erroneously inferred. Wolseley had always had the contingency in mind and had even formed the Camel Corps expressly for the purpose.² Once Khartoum had been relieved, Gordon and his Egyptians were clearly going to be evacuated across the Bayūda, for this was the only route by which they could be aligned with the foodstuffs being stockpiled along the Nile. What neither Buller nor anybody else yet knew was that Wolseley had set his heart on extricating his hand-picked Camel Corps troops by an altogether different route. The army commander's as yet undeclared intent was to march to the sea along the Berber-Suakin caravan road: the secret and unendorsed campaign objective was the defeat of Osman Digna and final pacification of the Red Sea Littoral. This was indeed a Grand Conception, an extraordinary campaign fit both to be Wolseley's last and to secure his place amongst the 'great captains' of the nineteenth century. He would reveal a glimpse of the grandiose nature of his thinking in a delusional journal entry of 8 January 1885:

*This is certainly a strange episode in our military history. It is the biggest operation the British Army has ever undertaken. I think those engaged in it, are now beginning to realise this fact, and to feel they have the honour of taking part in an operation the like of which has never been undertaken before.*³

Thus were the campaigns of Marlborough, Clive, Wolfe and Wellington consigned to the second rank.

In order to chastise the rebellious Bija on the way home, it would first be necessary to get large quantities of supplies to Berber. Prior to that there would be a point of 'logistic no-return', somewhere along the course of the Great Bend, where pressing on to Berber and marching to the sea would become the best, indeed the only, course of action: a point where it was more practical to press forward than to turn back; a point where the politicians would be unable to gainsay the best military judgment of the commander in the field. A painstaking search for an item of evidence which would serve to confirm the existence of the grand conception at last paid

¹ Ibid, i, 135.

² Ibid, i, 133.

³ Wolseley, journal entry 8 Jan. 85; see Preston (ed.), *Relief of Gordon*, 111.

dividends, after it had looked for a long time that it might not be achievable, a reflection of the great secrecy surrounding the scheme. Lieutenant Colonel Hugh McCalmont had served on the Red River and in Asanteland, South Africa and Egypt. He had become such a friend and confidante of Wolseley that he was also known to the general's young daughter by his nickname. 'The Little King' was to have been CO LCR, but had been dislodged when the Prince of Wales pressed the Duke to appoint his friend Colonel Stanley Clarke to the command. Writing home from Korti, on or about 18 January 1885, before any news of Stewart's progress in the Bayūda had arrived at Wolseley's headquarters, McCalmont confided: 'I know now the general idea of what is going to be done....I fancy the advance from Shendy on Khartoum will come off about 14th of February, but it is rash to prophesy.' Then he added, 'The camels [i.e. the Camel Corps] will return by Suakin. This is a secret.'¹

It might seem improbable that a commander could so long conceal his future intent from his chief of staff, but having first recollected the treatment of Hamley in the Egyptian campaign,² the following passage in *The Soldier's Pocket-Book for Field Service* will also be instructive:

*....indeed a general commanding should so keep his council, that his army, and even the staff around him, should be not only in ignorance of his real intentions, but convinced that he aims at totally different objects from what are his true ones. Without saying so directly, you can lead your army to believe anything....*³

These words were based upon no standing conceptual precept of the time, but rather are pure Wolseley in their conception. They might reasonably be taken in their own right as a recipe for befuddled planning; but divorce commander and chief of staff, between two widely separated locations, for up to two months, and the likelihood of dire consequences will be multiplied exponentially.

6.6 CHRISTMAS AT KORTI

As we have seen in Buller's own words, the plan outlined to him on Christmas Eve, when at last he caught up with the army commander, was for Stewart and the Camel Corps to push across the Bayūda to Metemmeh and there marry up with Gordon's steamers. None of this was yet generally known to the force. Wolseley intended to accompany the movement in person, in effect assuming tactical command of the Desert Column. At this stage he was still of the view that the rebel movement was neither militarily nor morally strong enough to do anything other than abandon the siege and retreat into Kordofan at the near-approach of British troops. In the meantime, General Earle would lead a brigade-strength River Column into the Great

¹ *The Memoirs of Major General Sir Hugh McCalmont KCB CVO*, (London, 1924), 236.

² The particular matter at issue was that Wolseley intended redeploying his force from Alexandria to a new port of disembarkation at Ismailia. Hamley only learned that Wolseley had gone to Ismailia 24 hours after the fact, when a staff officer turned up with a letter from the army commander containing 2nd Division's new instructions.

³ Wolseley, *Soldier's Pocket-Book*, 82.

Bend, with the aim of capturing, first, Abū-Hamed, which would open the caravan route south from Korosko, and subsequently, Berber, opening the caravan road to Suakin and the sea. At Korosko 200,000 rations of groceries, 100,000 of biscuits and 500,000 of tinned meat had been stockpiled in the care of Major Rundle. Rundle was to convoy a large consignment of rations across the desert to Abū-Hamed, in the care of the Abadeh friendlies earlier recruited by Kitchener, within four days of the town falling to Earle.¹ Once the existence of the Grand Conception is realised it becomes obvious that amongst these huge quantities were the rations intended to sustain the march to the sea.

Wolseley's journal entry for Christmas Eve reveals the proposed timetable for these plans, albeit the language is vague in places. The Desert Column was to cross the Bayūda in two echelons, a first and larger echelon, which he would accompany in person, and a second echelon under Buller. He and Stewart would set out on 2 January with the object of reaching Metemmeh five days later. Buller would be 24-48 hours behind them and would join them on the river on either 8 or 9 January. General Earle, for his part, would set off upriver on 7 or 8 January with the aim of taking Abū-Hamed by 1 February. Importantly the journal entry concludes by remarking that 1 February is, '...the date when I hope with God's aid to be in Khartoum. I may be there some days earlier. If I can I shall avoid fighting until I reach Khartoum and will attack the Mahdi's position D.V. [sic – Latin, *deo volente*, God willing] the day after I can ferry my troops across the White Nile to the neighbourhood of Omdurman.'² The last part of the passage is curious, in so far as Omdurman and Metemmeh both lie on the west bank of the Nile, and could be taken to imply that Wolseley envisaged using Gordon's steamers to ferry the Desert Column across to the east bank, in the vicinity of Shendy, so as eventually to gain the city through the stretch of desert upon which North Khartoum now stands. This makes perfect tactical sense, although there are no other traces of the notion anywhere else in the sources.

The real significance of the 24 December journal entry is that it constitutes proof positive that when the River Column was despatched into the Great Bend, Wolseley knew perfectly well that it would be playing no part in the relief of Khartoum. This makes it plain that the real purpose of the River Column's advance was to seize Berber and facilitate a march to the sea. By now enquiries from Hartington about the merits of sending a second force to cooperate with the Nile Expedition via the Suakin-Berber axis, were threatening to scupper the Grand Conception, as any such deployment would see Osman Digna routed in the littoral long before the Camel Corps could come up from the west. Wolseley began by replying that such an operation would only help if it could be effected within 60 days and that he very much doubted that this was possible. When Hartington pressed the matter again, the next objection raised was that it could only be undertaken by 2,000 troops 'picked' after the fashion of the Camel Corps, something which Wolseley knew the Duke would never consent to for a second time. At length Hartington's enthusiasm for a second front forced the admission, 'I have always contemplated the possibility of sending all mounted troops back by Berber and Suakin, to open road and crush Osman Digna. There can be no

¹ Colvile, OH, i, 135.

² Wolseley, journal entry 24 Dec. 84; see Preston (ed.), *Relief of Gordon*, 98.

tranquillity in the Sudan as long as he remains defiant. Of course I may not eventually be able to do that.¹ In fact, as his Christmas Eve journal entry shows, he had been planning to contrive just such a scenario all along.

Christmas Day was a working day, save for divine service and some evening festivities. Buller and his staff subordinates slipped into overdrive to try and address all the unanticipated logistic shortfalls, keeping the telegraph operators busy all day. Wood was instructed to send forward all the camel transport at the portage points on the river and backfill the gaps with newly purchased animals. Similarly the commandants at all the posts on the lines of communication were to buy up every camel they could find and hasten them to the front. The commandant at Abu Fatmeh was to move all the food stockpiled there forward to Korti. The officer commanding at Dongola was to send up the 800 *ardebs* of barley, 1,600 *ardebs* of *dhura* and 170 *ardebs* of dates known to be stored in the *mudir's* warehouses. Colville, who was upriver at Merowe, was instructed to procure large quantities of *dhura*, barley and firewood.²

After completing some basic staff computations, Buller approached Wolseley to say that he doubted whether it would be possible to start the Desert Column as early as 2 January and that it might be advisable to put its departure back by a week. Wolseley's journal shows that he was anxious not to get to Metemmeh only to be faced with a long delay waiting for the second echelon, on the grounds, 'That would give the Mahdi time to arrange his plans. What I should really like best would be move across the desert with the whole of my force in one body or in two echelons one behind the other at a day's interval.' In the event the plan he actually enacted gave the Mahdī so much time to 'arrange his plans' that Stewart would be compelled to fight two battles en route to Metemmeh. Crucially, in terms of ascertaining his precise intent, Wolseley continued, 'I should then be able to push on to Khartoum without halting.' This demonstrates that the advance of the Desert Column was intended at this point to be one flowing movement all the way through to Khartoum. In so far as Gordon's steamers had any part to play, it was to support an overland advance. In other words Stewart's brigade was going to ride 174 miles to Metemmeh, storm the town and then ride the final 100 miles south to Khartoum, there to give battle and relieve the city.

Wolseley and his staff ate early that evening, so as to be in good time for an impromptu Christmas concert.³ The Royal Engineers had lashed a stage together and the performance proceeded by the light of two huge bonfires. It was attended by all the troops at Korti. Stewart's brigade was represented by all three squadrons of the 19th Hussars (15 & 283); all four companies of MICR (22 & 392); three out of four GCR companies (15 & 286); two out of five HCR companies (10 & 156); but only one of the three LCR companies (6 & 113). Of the seven infantry battalions coming upriver only 1st South Staffords (18 & 535) had yet reached Korti, though 1st Royal Sussex was represented by 3 officers & 163 NCOs and men, roughly two-fifths of the battalion. Counting the staff and minor details of departmental troops, there were 134 officers &

¹ Colville, OH, i, 138-9.

² Ibid, i, 134.

³ Wolseley, journal entry 25 Dec. 84; see Preston (ed.), *Relief of Gordon*, 99.

2,086 NCOs and men in the concentration area that evening.¹ With the exception of the general-officers and a handful of the most trusted staff officers, everybody else was still oblivious to the fact that in a few days' time most of those present would be marching into the Bayūda.

6.7 OPERATIONAL LEVEL DECISION-MAKING: DECEMBER 1884 TO JANUARY 1885

With the Christmas festivities dispensed with, tremendous bustle got underway on the lines of communication. While no detailed orders had yet been disseminated, the multiplicity of telegraphed imprecations that this asset or that item should be hurried to the front served to suggest that there was something afoot. Wolseley spent most of Boxing Day in company with Buller and Stewart, working up a detailed scheme of manoeuvre for the overland advance, or the 'great leap in the dark' as he termed it in his journal.² On 27 December Buller was able to telegraph the latest thinking back to Wood.

As I have already informed you by telegram in cipher, Lord Wolseley has decided on dividing his force at Korti. One division will proceed by water and one by land. The force proceeding by water will consist of 1½ squadrons 19th Hussars, and 4 regiments of infantry, viz., the Staffordshire Regiment, the Royal Highlanders, the Gordon Highlanders, the Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry (it is possible some of these may be changed for others), battery of Egyptian Artillery, Egyptian Camel Corps, headquarters and about 400 camels of the 11th Transport Company.

Major General Earle will command the force, with Colonel H. Brackenbury as his principal staff officer and second in command. This force will be concentrated at Hamdab, just above the Gerendid Cataract, and will move thence, taking 100 days' whaler supplies with it.

As you are aware, Major Rundle, E.A., has been directed to take steps to have a further supply of rations at Abū-Hamed within four days of the arrival there of this force. Major General Earle will have one regiment placed at his disposal, in addition to the above named force, from which to detail such posts on his line of march as he may require. As to these he has been directed to inform you.

The force proceeding by land will be under the command of Brigadier-General Sir H. Stewart, and will consist of 1½ squadrons of 19th Hussars, the four Camel Regiments, one battery of the Royal Artillery, and a portion, or perhaps the whole, of the Royal Sussex Regiment. All the transport camels, not detailed for the water force, will accompany this force. General Lord Wolseley and his staff will accompany this force. The intention is to form a post at the Jakdul Wells, which will be garrisoned by the Sussex Regiment, and there to collect 60 days' of supply for the whole force. The mounted troops will then attack and occupy Metemmeh, and either proceed at once to Khartoum, or else

¹ Colvile, OH, ii, 243-5.

² Wolseley, journal entry 27 Dec. 84; see Preston (ed.), *Relief of Gordon*, 100.

*bring some more supplies, and a garrison from Jakdul to Shendi [sic] as circumstances may direct.*¹

There were four items presaged in Buller's telegram which did not in the end come to pass. First, the 19th Hussars would not be evenly divided between the two columns: instead Stewart was to get two squadrons and Earle one. Second, the River Column was not assigned any additional infantry to secure its lines of communication, but instead was designated a 'flying column', which meant that it had no lines of communication and would have to carry its supplies aboard the boats until such time as it had taken Abū-Hamed and opened up the Korosko caravan road for Rundle.² Third, Earle's command would be assigned nothing like 400 baggage-camels, but instead was given only a few dozen. Finally and most importantly, Wolseley never did get forward of Korti. When Lord Hartington was notified that the army commander intended to disappear into the Bayūda with the Camel Corps, he effectively vetoed the proposal by pressing him to remain at the end of the telegraph.³

With the army now dividing into two brigade-sized wings, diverging between desert and river, and many of the 'force troops' still to arrive, Korti at least represented a central hub on the lines of communication. Its advantages as a headquarters location ended there, for unless the Desert Column left a line of vulnerable heliograph stations to its rear, it was inevitable that Wolseley would be out of touch with events at the front for as long as it took camel-mounted couriers to hasten across the Bayūda. From Metemmeh, on the far side of the desert, this would entail a four-day journey, or a round trip of more than a week. Hartington was happier that this should be so than that London should lose touch with the senior officer in the field, an illustration of how increasingly sophisticated communications systems were changing the face not only of continental warfare, but also drawing the curtain on the semi-autonomous way in which the 'small wars of empire' had long been waged. There was, nonetheless, an onus on the army commander not to lose touch with his subordinate commanders, least of all, in an operation of its type, with the commander of his foremost elements. As an experienced commander Wolseley should instinctively have known that there would come a point when it would no longer be tactically sustainable for him to remain at Korti, whether the Secretary of State liked it or not.

The most vital planning consideration in crossing the Bayūda was the amount of water available at each of the recognised staging posts, as a brigade-sized column was sure to be many times larger than the trade-caravans which occasionally plied the route. It was known that by far the greatest quantity was to be found about 98 miles into the desert at a place called Jakdul Wells, though this was something of a misnomer as the water there was actually to be found in a series of natural rock-pools distributed along a steeply plunging watercourse. The staging posts *en route* to Jakdul were Hambok, Howeyat and Abu Halfā, while 51 miles beyond Jakdul, and about 25 miles shy of Metemmeh and the Nile, lay the Abu Klea Valley, where a series of *bona*

¹ Colville, OH, i, 135-6.

² Ibid, i, 135.

³ Ibid, i, 136.

fide desert wells would provide a much less generous supply of water than the halfway halt at Jakdul.

After water the next most important consideration was the intelligence picture. Kitchener had been monitoring the situation in the Bayūda and, so far, had been unable to detect any indication that an overland advance was likely to meet with heavy resistance in the open desert. Metemmeh, on the other hand, was known to be strongly held. A traveller who passed that way on 15 December, subsequently to be questioned by Colville at Merowe on Christmas Day, reported that there were about 3,000 Ja'liyyīn and Awadiyeh of fighting age quartered there. He added that they appeared to be well supplied with Remingtons and could dispose two brass mountain-guns. Shendy, a short distance downstream and on the opposite bank, was believed by Colville's informant to house an additional 1,000 rebels.¹

Buller's computations had shown that there were insufficient camels available to permit a single-phase advance, all the way through to Metemmeh. The best that could be done in the circumstances would be to mount a preliminary operation to secure Jakdul Wells and pre-position a large quantity of stores there. These would be used for the sustainment of an in-place garrison, the passage of the main force and for the support of subsequent operations around Metemmeh. This would entail the same animals shuttling back and forth to Jakdul with heavy loads and might, through physical attrition, reduce the quantity of baggage-camels available for the main advance.

On 28 December 1st South Staffords set off for the village of Hamdab, the River Column's concentration area and jumping off point. The battalion was played aboard its 55 boats by the band of the Royal Sussex.² Having at last decided that the time had come to take the plunge into the desert, Wolseley ordered that Stewart should march for Jakdul Wells, with two Camel Corps regiments and a baggage-train of more than a thousand animals, on the morning of Tuesday 30 December. Still unaware that a crossing of the Bayūda was at hand, a number of war-correspondents continued forwarding copy to London describing how the Camel Corps would soon be moving upriver with General Earle. This was a typical peril of reporting Wolseley's campaigns: while the general might entertain the odd correspondent at his table, he also viewed them as fair game and took perverse pleasure in seeing them submit befuddled reports to their editors. Macdonald of the *Western Morning News* felt certain that they were deliberately misled at this time, in accordance with the notions propounded in *The Soldier's Pocket-Book*.³

Having unloaded the stores and left GCR to secure the wells, Stewart could be expected to return on either 6 or 7 January. After a day's rest Wolseley would then take over and lead the main body move via Jakdul to Metemmeh. It was now anticipated that the full-strength fighting force would consist of two squadrons of the 19th Hussars (operating as a single enlarged squadron), three Camel Corps regiments, 1st Royal Sussex, a screw-gun battery and a 50-man Naval Brigade incorporating a Gardner machine-gun. The support assets would consist of a detachment of 26 Field

¹ Ibid, ii, 12-13.

² Macdonald, *Too Late*, 164.

³ Ibid, 165-6; see Wolseley, *Soldier's Pocket-Book*, 225.

Company RE, four medical sections and Nos. 9 and 11 Transport Companies. With the exception of Lieutenant Colonel Percy Barrow's 19th Hussars, which had been mounted on Syrian ponies expropriated from the EA's cavalry regiment, and the native camel drivers, who were meant to walk but were already showing a strong disinclination to do so, the rest of the force would be camel-borne. The logistic units were all *ad hoc* in nature, with considerably more native workers on their strength than British officers and soldiers. At least three-quarters of 1st Royal Sussex would be assigned to garrison duty at Jakdul Wells and Abu Klea. Once the infantry battalion had in large part been detached, the number of sabres and bayonets remaining would total barely 1,500 men.

This then was the numerically feeble force with which Wolseley intended not merely to cross the Bayūda to Metemmeh, but subsequently to defeat the Mahdī's cohorts in a battle of decision on the outskirts of Khartoum. If it was true that he would also be able to count on the support of a small flotilla of steamers, there was little prospect of the besieged garrison providing any meaningful support. The aptly named 'great leap in the dark' undoubtedly constituted a high-risk operation of war, but this was the unhappy pass to which Wolseley's adoption of the Nile Route had brought him. It is all the more remarkable, given the great numerical disparity in favour of the enemy, that his plan still called for General Earle to head off into the Great Bend without any prospect of being able to support an overland thrust through to Khartoum.

Even now there was a workable answer to the conundrum, although it would have called for the abandonment of the much vaunted 'novel expedients' and the still closeted Grand Conception alike. Save in so far as the proposition was a vital enabler to the return march to the sea, there were no legitimate grounds for sending the bulk of the infantry past Korti in whalers. It was perfectly possible at this time of year to march across the Bayūda on foot, as 1st Royal Irish would later demonstrate by reaching Metemmeh without incurring a single heat casualty. A camel-borne column with a heavily laden baggage-train was no faster moving than marching infantry, and it had always been intended that the Camel Corps would dismount to fight in any case. There was indeed an answer, if only Wolseley could bring himself to swallow his pride: the best course of action in the situation now confronting the British would have been to re-role the Camel Corps as infantry and re-assign the riding-camels to the commissaries. This would not only have enabled the Desert Column to mount a single-phase advance on Metemmeh, but would also have allowed some of the infantry battalions to follow up and lend close support to Stewart's brigade, thus mitigating some of the risk inherent in the existing plan. Indeed 1st South Staffords, some 550 additional bayonets, could have been brigaded under Stewart's command without the loss of a single day. A one-phase crossing of the Bayūda would have allowed the British to avoid any heavy fighting in the desert and effect a rendezvous with Gordon's steamers by the end of the first week of January. Metemmeh could have been carried by direct assault, or alternatively its defenders could have been 'fixed' by entrenching one of the additional battalions on the Nile to the south of the town. There would still at that juncture have been more than a fortnight in hand for a stronger and substantially intact fighting column to cover the last 100 miles and effect the relief of

Khartoum. Unhappily for Gordon, none of these things would come to pass. Indeed it is to be doubted whether anybody on the staff ever had the temerity to mention the notion of dismounting the Camel Corps. Here, then, was another failure of Campaign Management and another missed decision point – in respect, that is, of the only Campaign Objective legitimised by Hartington’s strategic direction.

6.8 STEWART MARCHES FOR JAKDUL WELLS

Stewart gave orders for his preliminary operation on the afternoon of 29 December. For many, even the officers, this was the first indication that a desert march was definitely afoot.¹ The following day he began assembling his command on a low plateau to the south-east, in readiness for a 3.00 *pm* departure, a timing predicated on marching mostly by night. The cavalry component would comprise a troop of 2 & 32 from the 19th Hussars.² The fighting escort would consist of all four GCR companies (21 & 360) under Lieutenant Colonel the Hon. Evelyn Boscawen, and the comparably structured MICR (23 & 358) under Major the Hon. George Gough. Two officers & 27 NCOs and men from 26 Field Company RE, commanded by Major James Dorward, had been attached to the Guards and would also be staying behind at Jakdul to install pumps and water troughs designed to improve the rapidity with which large numbers of animals could be watered. Between the two full-strength camel regiments, GCR to the front and MICR to the rear, came a ponderous thousand camel baggage-train.

Because only one of the three LCR companies had yet come up to Korti, Colonel Stanley Clarke had been temporarily assigned to the unenviable post of baggage-master. Always more a high-society man than a serious soldier, Clarke had never before seen active service. As we have seen, his appointment as CO LCR had been forced on Wolseley, obliging him to let down his friend McCalmont, who, much to his distaste, was now serving as Clarke’s second-in-command. Clarke epitomised the sort of officer that Wolseley loathed and, for all his royal connections, he would have to step carefully around a commander all too ready to find fault with officers of such ilk.

Numbers 9 and 11 Transport Companies, under the overall direction of Assistant Commissary-General Robert Nugent CB,³ made up the bulk of Clarke’s baggage-train with 5 officers, 26 NCOs and men, 140 native drivers and some 540 baggage-camels. In addition to the theoretically more robust baggage-camels, 320 riding-camels had also been pressed into service as beasts of burden and were being led in strings of three by camel-mounted detachments of LCR (10 & 81) and HCR (7 & 91). The Royal Artillery paraded 2 officers, 20 NCOs and men, 21 natives and 155 camels, but had been committed to transporting stores rather than guns, all of which were left behind at Korti. The medical units fielded 6 officers, 16 NCOs and men, 35 native drivers and 80 camels, under the command of the Principal Medical Officer or PMO, Surgeon-Major Frederick Ferguson.⁴ In addition to ammunition, medical

¹ Dawson, *Stewart’s Desert March*, 723.

² War-diary entry 4 Jan. 85.

³ A.C.G. was the departmental equivalent of Lt. Col.

⁴ The unit strengths cited here are drawn from the 30 Dec. entry in the War-diary. They differ slightly from the figures cited in the Official History; see Colville, ii, 2-3.

comforts and all sorts of miscellaneous stores, Nugent had managed to load 50,000 rations aboard the camels, sufficient to sustain 2,000 men for 25 days.¹ This was a good enough start to a logistic build up, but nothing like enough to sustain operations through to a conclusion.

Stewart's brigade headquarters consisted of 5 officers, 3 NCOs and men, 2 native servants and 11 camels. The general's personal staff officers were Major Fredrick Wardrop of the 3rd Dragoon Guards, an able and experienced officer with 26 years' service; David Ogilvy, Earl of Airlie, a 29 year-old captain in the 10th Hussars serving as brigade major; and Captain Frank Rhodes² of the Royal Dragoons, employed as the ADC. The correspondent of the *Morning Post*, St. Leger Herbert, was also working as the general's private secretary. Herbert had never been in the Army, but had worked for Wolseley in a civil capacity in Cyprus and South Africa and been much attracted to the military life. More recently he had also been with Stewart and Rhodes in the Red Sea Littoral, where he had been wounded at Tamai. In short 'Sankey' Herbert enjoyed the confidence of the generals and was allowed to comport himself as a staff officer. Kitchener was also attached to the brigade staff as the Intelligence Department representative.

The column marched punctually at 3.00 *pm*, with the two Camel Corps regiments riding on section-strength frontages. All told it consisted of 83 officers, 1,014 NCOs and men, 233 native workers, 2,158 camels and 46 horses.³ Wolseley had ridden out to see Stewart off and was greatly pleased by the formidable appearance of the Guards and Mounted Infantry. John Cameron watched the column depart and in some typically well-informed coverage for the *Standard* reflected on some of the vulnerabilities of a camel-borne brigade.

Broad as was the face on which this strange column marched, it extended fully a mile in length, and would be an unwieldy body in case of an attack by the enemy. The Camel Corps and Mounted Infantry could form up quickly enough, but confusion would be likely to prevail among the baggage animals, for camels are the most obstinate of creatures, and object particularly to sudden and hurried movements. Their Somali [sic – Adeni] drivers, too, could scarcely be expected to be very cool or steady if suddenly assailed by a large body of yelling tribesmen.

*In case of attack the Guards will form square echeloned on the left front of the column, the Mounted Infantry will do the same on the right rear. The column is, however, so long that their fire would hardly cover the entire line, unless the enemy were perceived approaching long enough before their attack to give time for the baggage-camels to close up into a compact body.*⁴

At the end of his report Cameron described how Wolseley and the staff rode alongside the column for two or three miles, before at length bidding Stewart farewell

¹ Wolseley, journal entry 4 Jan. 85; see Preston (ed.), *Relief of Gordon*, 107.

² Elder brother of Cecil John Rhodes.

³ Colvile, OH, ii, 2.

⁴ Cameron, the *Standard*, Wed. 31 Dec. 84.

and turning back for Korti. His penultimate sentence foreshadowed many of the difficulties ahead. 'Short as had been the distance marched from camp it had been long enough to show that some at least of the camels had been badly loaded, for several were already falling out of line in order to have their burdens repacked.' Stewart led on for two hours, before calling a supper halt from 5.00-7.00 *pm*. Then, having doubled the frontage and halved the length of the baggage-train in preparation for night marching,¹ he pushed the force on through a still and uneventful night, halting periodically to give the slower moving baggage-camels time to close up on the head of the column. At 8.00 *am* the following morning the general at last initiated a 7-hour rest halt.² Thus far the caravan road had been tolerably good going and was discernible even by moonlight.³

6.9 IMPLICATIONS OF GORDON'S LAST MESSAGE

At around the same time as the men bound for Jakdul were throwing themselves down to sleep some 34 miles into the Bayūda, one of the ADCs brought Wolseley a telegram from Merowe announcing that a courier from Gordon had arrived there the previous evening. The man was bearing a letter addressed to Wolseley and was now on his way downriver in a launch. Because Merowe was located about 35 miles upstream of Korti, the wait for Gordon's news was drawn out until noon. When at length the courier arrived, it transpired that the only physical message in his possession was a slip of paper about the size of a postage stamp. On one side was Gordon's seal, while on the other was a tiny handwritten message which read, 'Khartoum all right. 14/12/84. C. G. Gordon.'⁴ It was evidently not for this alone that the messenger had risked his life. Then the man began to utter the text of a carefully rehearsed oral message:

We are besieged on three sides: Omdurman, Halfiyeh and Hoggiali. Fighting goes on day and night. Enemy cannot take us except by starving us out. Do not scatter your troops, enemy are numerous. Bring plenty of troops if you can. We still hold Omdurman on the left bank and the fort on the right bank. Mahdi's people have thrown up earthworks within rifle shot of Omdurman. Mahdi lives out of gunshot. About four weeks ago Mahdi's people attacked that place and disabled one steamer. We disabled one of the Mahdi's guns. Three days after fight was renewed on the south, and the rebels were again driven back. Saleh Bey [a prominent Shā'iqī loyalist] and Slatin [the Austrian-born Mudir of Darfur] are chained in Mahdi's camp.

Secret and Confidential [an expression likely to have been inserted by Wolseley's headquarters]. *Our troops are suffering from lack of provisions. The food we still have is little, some grain and biscuit. We want you to come quickly. You should come by Metemmeh or Berber. Make by these two roads. Do not leave Berber in your rear. Keep enemy on your front, and when you take Berber*

¹ Grant, *Cassell's History*, iii, 50.

² War-diary entry 30 Dec. 84. The official history times the halt at 07.30 *am*; see Colville, OH, ii, 3.

³ Dawson, *Stewart's Desert March*, 724.

⁴ Wolseley to his wife, 31 Dec. 84; see Arthur (ed.), *Wolseley Letters*, 137.

*send me word from Berber. Do this without letting rumours of your approach spread abroad. In Khartoum there are no butter [sic], no dates, little meat. All food is very dear.*¹

This is the full text of the message as recorded in a telegram sent by Wolseley to Baring the same day. Though it is nowhere stated as fact, it is safe to assume that this represents a translation from Arabic conducted through an interpreter. The message had an unsettling effect on Wolseley, whose first response, as recorded in his journal entry of that night, was to complain that it imperilled his plans. The reality, though, was that his thinking had been based all along on a gross underestimation of Muḥammad Aḥmad and the Mahdīst movement.

*The messenger brings me a long rambling message which I cannot depend on, saying I am to come very quickly, that I must have a large force as the enemy is very numerous &c. &c. He adds Khartoum can only be taken by starvation & that food is scarce. Altogether this is most unsatisfactory, & unsettles my plans without giving me any information which is worth having.*²

By the time night fell Wolseley was racked with uncertainty and went to bed, ‘with a heavy heart – Oh God how heavy!’ as he put it.³

Stewart resumed his march at 3.30 *pm* that afternoon, with 64 miles still to go. He halted for a supper break from 5.15–8.00 *pm* and half an hour into his second night-march reached the wells at Hambok, to find that there was only a limited quantity of muddy water to be had.⁴ The column pushed on through the evening in the hope that Howeiyat Wells would prove more bountiful. An hour into the New Year the column reached Howeiyat and was allowed to bivouac for the rest of the night. It had covered 17 miles since its last long halt and was now 51 miles forward of Korti.⁵

6.10 WOLSELEY VACILLATES

6.10.1 New Year’s Day: Adapting the Plan

The army commander slept badly, rose at 4.00 *am* and immediately woke Buller to cancel the dawn departure for Merowe of a squadron of the 19th Hussars. With that he retired to his tent, further to ponder the implications of Gordon’s message.⁶ While we know little of the staff toing and froing of New Year’s Day, Wolseley’s journal provides a good overview of its outcome. It is clear that Gordon’s latest advice transformed his estimation of the Mahdīst threat. That Wolseley had been drawn into the timeless trap of despising his enemy was to some extent Gordon’s fault, as many

¹ Wolseley to Baring, 31 Dec 84; see Egypt No.1/1885, 132.

² Wolseley, journal entry 31 Dec. 84; see Preston (ed.), *Relief of Gordon*, 102.

³ *Ibid*, 103.

⁴ Colvile, OH, ii, 3; Dawson, *Stewart’s Desert March*, 725.

⁵ Dawson, *Stewart’s Desert March*, 725.

⁶ Wolseley, journal entry 1 Jan. 85; see Preston (ed.), *Relief of Gordon*, 103.

of his early despatches had displayed a tendency to belittle the Mahdī's hold over his followers, creating an impression of fragility which had no foundation in reality. It had not helped either that the siege had not been prosecuted particularly vigorously for the first few months, during which period the greater part of the rebel host had remained in Kordofan. Thus Gordon's early estimates of enemy's strength had failed to encapsulate the true extent of the Mahdīst movement's formidable military capacity.

The most important injunctions in Gordon's message were: come quickly because food is running out; bring plenty of troops because the enemy is numerous; keep the enemy in front; and do not leave Berber in your rear. Wolseley's current plan complied only with the first of these injunctions and was in danger of positively flying in the face of the remainder. It is hard, even with the benefit of hindsight, to know what caused Gordon to set so much store by the enemy presence at Berber. The Amīr Muḥammad al-Khair 'Abd Allāh Khūjalī was an ardent and fiery Islamist, but in no sense a gifted military commander. Moreover it was doubtful if the local tribes, the 'Abābda, Barabra and Bisharin, could put more than 2-3,000 men in the field. Gordon might conceivably have been worried by the prospect of the Berberine rebels striking west against the British lines of communication across the Bayūda, albeit no such threat was ever to materialise.

At some point in his New Year's Day deliberations, Wolseley resolved to switch two-thirds of his infantry away from the river axis to the desert one. His journal entry of that evening is important, as it is the only place where this first change of heart manifests itself.

All along I have been counting on an expression which occurs more than once in Gordon's letters, that the whole attack upon Khartoum would collapse if he had a few hundred determined soldiers upon whom he could depend. I have been basing my calculations on this view of the position & had therefore determined upon forcing my way into Khartoum with about 1500 of the finest men in our or any other army. Now this message from him tells me not to advance unless I am strong. I have therefore determined upon sending four battalions to Matemmeh across the desert, one to be the garrison of that place, the other three to go on with the Camel Corps, 19th Hussars and 10 guns to Khartoum. I shall have to hold the wells at Abu Klea, Gakdul and Hambok as well as Korti. So including Matemmeh & Korti I shall have three Battalions [sic] on this desert line of commns. [sic] leaving only two Battalions & detachments of Cavy., [sic] Artillery & R.E. for operations up the river to Abu Ahmed. This will be a safer plan of operation than that I had previously determined upon but it will take more time & prevent me perhaps from being in Khartoum as I had hoped to be with a fighting force on the 31st Jany., at latest. However, God is great, in Him is my trust & with his aid I shall yet be in Khartoum on or before that date. The new year has not opened brightly for me, but I don't believe things are nearly as bad as they look: Gordon's nerve cannot be fresh and vigorous after all he has gone through during the last eight months as they were when he & I last met.¹

¹ Wolseley, journal entry 1 Jan. 85; see Preston (ed.), *Relief of Gordon*, 103-4.

It might indeed have taken some additional time to bring up the infantry; but nothing like as long as sending them 400 unnecessary miles by rowing-boat. Importantly this new scheme of manoeuvre would not have precluded a rapid advance by a leading echelon based on the Camel Corps. Since it preserved the potential to make best speed across the desert, but avoided the unnecessary dissipation of combat power, this was a better scheme of manoeuvre than that which had preceded it. We should note in passing Wolseley's reiteration of his target date and observe that he would later feel no compunction about damning Wilson for gaining Khartoum on 28 January.

While Wolseley was pondering his change of plan, Stewart was once again on the move. Because the wells at Howeiyat were around 20 feet deep, there was no practical means of watering a large number of animals quickly. The column set off again at 8.00 *am*, now with MICR leading and GCR at the rear.¹ The first long halt of the day was from 1.00-3.30 *pm*, while the ensuing march lasted from mid-afternoon until dusk. The supper break ran from 6.30-8.00 *pm*, at which latter point the moon rose, cueing another lengthy night-march.²

6.10.2 Friday 2 January: The Death Knell of General Gordon

When Wolseley rose on Friday morning to meet with Buller and the staff, some unknown factor caused him to reverse his New Year's Day resolutions. By the time the cabal had broken up, he was no longer intent on mounting a more powerful thrust across the Bayūda, but instead had fixated on Gordon's injunction, 'Do not leave Berber in your rear.' Wolseley's answer to this particular conundrum was to leave the infantry on the boats, as originally intended, and mount a much slower-moving pincer movement against Muḥammad al-Khair. The Desert Column would be tasked to gain Metemmeh as before, but instead of immediately dashing south for Khartoum would secure a lodgement on the Nile and push an emissary ahead by steamer, in order to confer with Gordon and ascertain just how long he could hold out. Only when the emissary returned to Korti to make his report would Wolseley decide whether to launch Stewart to the north, to cooperate with Earle against Berber, or to the south, so as to attempt to reach Khartoum as rapidly as possible. In an ideal world Gordon would declare when pressed that he could hold out for a good while yet, so that the relief of Khartoum could be effected by the River and Desert Columns advancing south from Metemmeh in unison. Earle's four battalions were to be committed to rowing around the Great Bend after all. The key point, though, is that despatching an emissary from Metemmeh to Khartoum by steamer represented a new, unnecessary and time-consuming phase of operations. It followed that the earliest date by which British troops could reach Khartoum in brigade strength would shift some considerable distance to the right: just how far to the right will be discussed later.

In essence, Wolseley appears to have been rattled by the injection of a degree of uncertainty into the intelligence picture, albeit nothing had actually changed. In

¹ Dawson, *Stewart's Desert March*, 725.

² The text cites the march/rest timings quoted in the War-diary. These are slightly at variance with those given in the Official History; see Colvile, OH, ii, 2-4. They are, however, broadly in agreement with Dawson.

striving to achieve certainty and mitigate a threat, the nature of which neither he nor Gordon were entirely certain of, he would necessarily be expending time he could no longer afford. There might have been some excuse for attaching greater importance to safety than to time, if the threat from Berber had been upgraded in scale, or now appeared in some way more immediate, but there was no new data to suggest either of these things. It is difficult not to interpret the sudden change of heart as mere vacillation. Of course there can be little doubt that any commander would have been feeling the heavy weight of his responsibilities at this juncture. But ultimately there were no grounds to believe that there was the remotest prospect of an emissary returning from Khartoum to report that Gordon would be fine for some weeks to come. On the contrary, everything pointed to the fact that the worst-case scenario, famine in Khartoum, must already be afoot. Before retiring to his camp-bed, Wolseley wrote up the events of the day as follows:

Another morning's study of the problem before me, going carefully into distances and dates, and Buller's calculations of the several problems I have set him, has caused me to fix upon the following plan of campaign. As I originally intended, I shall move all the mounted troops and the Battery of R.A. & provisions for them to Matemmeh & there create a post which I shall eventually garrison with a Battn. of Infry. This will enable me to communicate direct by steamer with Gordon & to arrange for our final advance upon Khartoum with him. At the same time Earle will advance upriver and punish Monassir tribe & then on to Abu Ahmed where I hope he may receive supplies direct from Korosko. He will leave a Battn. or half a Battalion at Abu Ahmed & then move to attack Berber in which operation I hope some of Gordon's steamers may be able to assist, the Naval Brigade manning them. Berber taken and a Battn. left there as a garrison, Earle to move on with all haste with three Battalions, the Egyptian Camel Corps & Egyptian Camel Battery & a Squadron of XIXth Hussars to join me at Matemmeh. The united force then to march for Khartoum. Of course our relief of Gordon will be thus greatly postponed, but this will enable me at any moment if Gordon sends to tell me he is in extremis, to push on with all the camel Regts. to Khartoum. The risk would perhaps be great, but no risk would be too great under those circumstances...Baring asked me if I was confident of success: I replied yes, provided Gordon would hold out until my infantry going by river could reach Khartoum.¹

It is noteworthy that Wolseley still makes allowance at this juncture for pushing through to Khartoum with the Desert Column only, should news come in at any point that Khartoum was at the end of its tether. It was earlier noted that the campaign planning conundrum had always been about the balance between tactical risk, logistic sustainability and time, but that the last of these factors was the most vital. It was not as if this had not been understood all along. The rest of Wolseley's journal entry for 2 January goes on to invoke divine intervention, as well it might, but concludes with the

¹ Wolseley, journal entry 2 Jan. 85; see Preston (ed.), *Relief of Gordon*, 104-5.

remarkable statement, 'I still feel that I shall be in Khartoum before the end of the month.'

6.11 SEIZURE OF JAKDUL WELLS

The final leg of Stewart's march to Jakdul Wells was completed at 7.00 *am* on 2 January. The only excitement to speak of had occurred in the early hours of that morning, when a party of the 19th Hussars surprised and scattered a small caravan. The rest of the 98-mile journey had been uneventful, although there had been periodic encounters with nomads. Kitchener's questioning had failed to elicit any intelligence of significance. Before being sent on their way, the locals had been encouraged to come in again with whatever livestock they were prepared to sell. An exception was made in the case of the brigand Ali Loda,¹ who had been found skulking in long grass and was immediately recognized by the knot of native guides.² The Ambukol men were all for executing him on the spot, but Stewart inferred that such a notorious villain must have excellent local knowledge and pressganged him as a guide.³

So far the troops had seemed to be paying all due care and attention to the loading of the baggage-camels. Nothing was more likely to induce unnecessary losses than the sort of carelessness which could result in an animal's flanks being rubbed raw to the ribcage. It was to avoid such difficulties that local drivers tended to break boxed stores open and transfer the contents into baggage nets, but this was just one aspect of camel management for which the British had come ill-prepared: cases of bully-beef, hardtack biscuit and Martini ammunition were all sharp corners, while netting and decent load-carrying pack-saddles were in short supply. Consequently improvisation became the order of the day. The necessity to take particular care over loading, and to remain constantly alert for slipped loads subsequently, was the principal reason why night-marching was not necessarily the best of ideas. Stewart had set what was a brisk pace for heavily laden baggage-camels, covering 98 miles in 63 hours and 45 minutes, of which some 32 hours and 45 minutes had been spent on the move. Lieutenant Douglas Dawson noted that the last 38½ miles of the journey had been completed in 14 hours.⁴ Fourteen animals had been driven into the ground and had been destroyed, while another 17 had been turned loose to die or recover. A handful would be rounded up on the return journey and gently coaxed back to Korti.⁵

Stewart had no intention of loitering at Jakdul Wells a moment longer than was necessary and had the word passed that the return march to Korti would begin just after sunset. The first priority was to get the tortuously slow process of watering more than 2,000 camels underway. The gorge in which the three main reservoirs were located was anything up to 300 feet deep, was commanded at a distance by a range of black hills and lay 2¼ miles north of the caravan road. The two upper pools could only be reached by scrambling up the rocks, which whilst inconvenient at least precluded

¹ According to Gleichen, 'Abu Loolah'.

² Gleichen, *With the Camel Corps*, 72.

³ *Ibid*, 80-1.

⁴ Dawson, *Stewart's Desert March*, 725.

⁵ Stewart's official despatch dated 4 Jan. 85; see Colville, OH, ii, 246-7.

their being fouled by animals. The lower pool was positioned amongst the rocks in such a way that only a few animals could be watered at a time. This might suffice for passing caravans, but fell a long way short of Stewart's requirements. The first job for Major Dorward was to pump water down into a mud trough, so that large numbers of animals could be watered simultaneously. This would take time and ingenuity, so for the present the tortuous business of watering the animals in handfuls would have to suffice.

The lowest and largest pool was 85 feet long, 55 feet wide and about 12 feet deep. Dorward calculated that it held 420,000 gallons of water, but judged that passing caravans and flocks had rendered it unfit for human consumption. This pool he reserved for watering animals and washing. The middle pool was 50 feet long by 16 feet wide, but only 6 feet deep, giving it a capacity of around 34,970 gallons. The dimensions of the upper pool were 85 feet long by 15 feet wide by 12½ feet deep, for a capacity of 84,080 gallons. Dorward pronounced himself content that the middle and upper pools contained good drinking water with a combined capacity of 119,050 gallons. There were three much smaller pools which the troops nicknamed 'Gazelle', 'Jackal' and 'Pothole' and which together contained an additional 10,432 gallons of drinking water.¹ Though Dorward did not yet know it, there was in fact a fourth and a fifth pool, further up the watercourse, with a combined capacity more than 2½ times as great as that of the second and the third.

Colonel Boscawen would have a total of 437 officers and men available to secure the wells. His command included six hussars to act as scouts, 21 & 360 from his own regiment, 2 & 25 Royal Engineers and 22 members of the medical staff.² Having secured a cave as his lodgings, Kitchener intended to spend the next few days reconnoitring in the direction of Metemmeh. All but ten of the GCR riding-camels would be returning to Korti with the convoy, in order that 1st Royal Sussex could be mounted for the main body move.

Stewart commenced the return march at 8.00 *pm* that evening, although he made only four miles before coming to a long halt. At 3.45 *am* on 3 January the column set off again. Although there were 90-minute halts for breakfast, lunch and dinner, it marched all day and through the evening, until at 1.00 *am* it reached Howeyiat Wells and bivouacked until first light. The march was resumed at 7.00 *am* and after about two hours reached Hambok.³ Captain Richard Fetherstonhaugh⁴ of C (Rifles) Company MICR was summoned to see the general and told that he would be staying behind to garrison the wells with the larger part of his company.⁵ He could expect to be relieved when the main body returned in a few days' time, but was to do what he could in the meantime to improve the water supply. Fetherstonhaugh's party consisted of 4 other officers, including a doctor, and 58 NCOs & men.⁶ While everybody else was settling

¹ Ibid, ii, 4-5.

² Unit strengths and the overall total given here are drawn from the War-diary entry of 2 Jan. 85 and are again slightly at variance with the figures given by Colvile.

³ Though Marling places the time of arrival not at 9.00 *am*, but 10.30 *am*; see *Rifleman and Hussar*, 129.

⁴ Pronounced 'Fanshaw'.

⁵ War-diary entry 4 Jan. 85.

⁶ The strength of the party left at Hambok is given in *Sir H. Stewart's Report on his Second March to Jakdul*, dated 14. Jan. 85; see Colvile, OH, ii, 250.

down to rest, Stewart wrote a report describing his progress to date. The message went away at about noon, an hour or so before the column resumed its march, in the care of Captain Lord Cochrane of No. 1 Company HCR. Cochrane arrived at the straw hut which served as the headquarters mess, just as Wolseley was finishing dinner. Macdonald, the war-correspondent, was present as a guest.¹ Quite how Wolseley imagined that the Mahdī would get to read *The Western Morning News* over the course of the coming week is not clear, but all the same he felt the need to usher Cochrane into the privacy of his tent before allowing him to proceed with his report. When Wolseley came to write up his journal he remarked of Stewart's operation, 'all this is very satisfactory.' He also noted the arrival of two telegrams from London. The first was anonymous and advised, 'Don't despise your enemy, go strong into desert.'

This was not only good advice but timely too, as the failure to mount a single-phase crossing of the Bayūda had already compromised British intent. A letter written by Muḥammad al-Khair that same day, 4 January, makes it clear that news of Stewart's advance had already reached both Berber and Metemmeh. It is certain therefore that well mounted couriers were dashing south for Omdurman to impart the intelligence to the Mahdī. The object of Muḥammad al-Khair's letter was to get his local Berberine fighters moving towards Metemmeh without delay, in response to an urgent appeal for assistance from the Amīr 'Ali-wad-Saad. Theologian or not, Muḥammad al-Khair also had some good military advice to offer: 'Warn all your followers to take their water-skins, their leathern sacks and food for the road; for if you meet the enemies of God, it will be in the desert and not in houses.'²

The second telegram had originated with the Cabinet was also referred to in the generals' journal:

*Also from the Govt. in answer to a question I put to them as to the propriety of my attempting to relief [sic] Gordon with an insufficient force in the event of his being in extremis. They say such a risk should not be entertained as any reverse to my Force would be a greater disaster than the fall of Khartoum & the capture of Gordon by the Mahdi.*³

The inference was clear: Wolseley was not to put hundreds of lives unreasonably at risk just to save one general-officer. That thousands of other lives were also at risk in the Sudanese capital would not appear to have registered with the Cabinet. How much influence this clarification of the governmental position might have had on Wolseley's prosecution of the campaign is a moot point: on the face of it none of the plans hatched two days earlier seem to have changed. What this second telegram may have done, however, was relegate a dash by the Desert Column from a strong possibility to an option of last resort. This premise will be examined further, when we come to consider Wolseley's orders for the advance on Metemmeh.

¹ Macdonald states that Cochrane arrived at the hut with 'Lieutenant Hine' of the Mounted Infantry and two other officers, but the name occurs nowhere else in the sources and there is no officer of that name in the Army Lists of 1884-5; see Macdonald, *Too Late*, 168.

² Wilson, *Korti to Khartum*, 297-9.

³ Wolseley, journal entry 3 Jan. 85; see Preston (ed.), *Relief of Gordon*, 107.

At noon the following day, Wolseley rode into the desert to see Stewart in. He was in an excellent mood and greeted the return of his favourite with a shower of compliments.¹ When Major Gough rode past, Wolseley is said to have remarked to him that MICR was the finest body of men he had ever seen and would surely be capable of marching from one end of Africa to the other.² The 196-mile round trip had been completed with the loss of 31 camels out of 2,195.³ If the number of dead animals was not a particular cause for concern, it was apparent that the succession of long night-marches had taken a severe toll of the remainder. Some already had serious sores on their backs and flanks, while others were very obviously developing them.⁴ All but the very strongest animals were exhausted. Come what may, they would all be going back into the Bayūda, inside three days, for a repeat performance in which they would see precious little food or water. Hence any loss of condition or chronic fatigue occasioned by the first journey was certain to be compounded by the rigours of the second. Major Alfred Turner⁵ of the Intelligence Department witnessed Stewart's return.

I rode out to meet him with Lord Wolseley, Sir Redvers Buller and others, and a most depressing sight was offered to our eyes...The camels we met were drooping and dead-beat, dragging themselves along with manifest difficulty – every now and then one falling to rise no more, while as far as the eye could reach, one saw along the track of the column ominous looking heaps, soared over by foul vultures, the number of which were increased every moment by others...Nearly all the transport had been given to this force – the advanced portion of the desert column – and it was but too clear that it had suffered irreparable damage, if not destruction, owing to this forced march.

*Lord Wolseley said to Sir Redvers Buller, alluding to the seizure of the Gakdul wells and his rapidity, that Herbert Stewart had done splendidly. Upon which Buller replied, in his blunt straight way, something about deserving a court martial for destroying the transport of the army. There was much to be said in favour of a rapid march to Gakdul, in order to seize the wells; but once seized, there was no reason whatever for making an equally forced march back to Korti, as there were none of the enemy within appreciable distance.*⁶

Turner's account, the gist of which is verified by a passage in Colvile,⁷ offers a valuable insight into the consequences of not resting the animals and failing to water and feed them at more realistic intervals. Buller's reported reaction to the state of the baggage-train is illuminating and stands in stark contrast to the very brief entry in Wolseley's journal for that evening which reads, 'I rode out to meet Herbert Stewart's column which marched back in very good order. Charlie Beresford arrived.'⁸

¹ Whitaker (ed.), *Verner Diary*, 27.

² Marling, *Rifleman and Hussar*, 130.

³ Colvile, OH, ii, 5.

⁴ Dundonald, *My Army Life*, 30.

⁵ Later Maj. Gen. Sir Alfred Turner KCB, CB.

⁶ Turner, *Sixty Years*, 99-101.

⁷ Colvile, OH, 5-6.

⁸ Wolseley, journal entry 5 Jan. 85; see Preston (ed.), *Relief of Gordon*, 108.

6.12 THE BAYŪDA CROSSING

6.12.1 Final Preparations

There were just over 72 hours intervening between Stewart's return to Korti and the second march of the Desert Column at 3.00 *pm* on Thursday 8 January. It was a period of great bustle and rising tension. Wolseley was becoming irritated by a running exchange of telegrams with Hartington over whether or not a second Suakin expedition could possibly help. He convinced himself that somebody in London was whispering against his conduct of the campaign and frightening the Secretary of State, when in fact sending a concurrent expedition to crush Osman Digna and the Hadendawa represented an eminently sensible piece of strategic thinking. Wolseley continued to obstruct the proposal, stating that he was confident of success and implying that such an expedition would be no more than an expensive luxury.¹ With the identification of the Grand Conception, the reason for this apparently curious line become apparent.

Seven prisoners had been brought in with Stewart's column and were interviewed over the ensuing 48 hours. Verner was one of the principal interrogators and noted, 'They of course lied like true "Believers", but one of the seven, a lad, split on them, and by a little judicial pressure, his brother also came to a more sensible frame of mind.' It was established that they hailed from Metemmeh, were members of the Awadiyeh tribe and were engaged in nothing more sinister than transporting dates to the Mahdī's camp. On the second day of questioning, Verner pressed the more cooperative members of the group to talk about Metemmeh. They described, 'a strongly built town of considerable size', which they said stood several hundred yards from the river at this time of year. Verner also gleaned that there were two or three mountain-guns in the town and about 2,000 fighting men, although a lower estimate of around 1,200 was also offered. The guns, said the prisoners, had been brought down from Berber to protect the town from Gordon's steamers, which they confirmed were still operating north of the Sixth Cataract.²

Even after Stewart's first journey, there was still a vast quantity of commissariat stores to be ferried out to Jakdul. It was arranged that Colonel Stanley Clarke would march out at sunset on 7 January, with another thousand-camel convoy. With the Guards already entrenched at Jakdul, the escort could be much lighter and would consist of the three regimental detachments of LCR which had so far come up to Korti,³ a total of 10 officers & 106 NCOs and men.⁴ This time Clarke was his own master but without Stewart's staff scurrying about, ensuring that everything was just so, he made a hash of his preparations and attracted Wolseley's opprobrium:

Nothing could be worse managed: he had had the advantage of being with the previous convoy and seeing what a well conducted convoy should be like & how

¹ Wolseley, journal entry 8 Jan. 85; Ibid, 109.

² Whitaker (ed.), Verner Diary, 27-8; Wilson, *Korti to Khartum*, p. xxi.

³ Colvile, OH, ii, 6.

⁴ Macdonald, *Too Late*, 171.

*it should be managed, but it was of no use to him. His heart was in Marlborough House or some Court circle. Any old woman who shines in such society would have done quite as well as he did. This is the first & it shall be the last time that he follows my fortunes.*¹

6.12.2 Wolseley's Orders

By the time Clarke moved off, Wolseley had completed his written orders to Stewart, Wilson and Beresford, each of whom had a key role to play in the next phase of operations. The precise nature of their orders is crucial to any objective assessment of Wolseley's management of the campaign and in gauging whether or not any of his subordinates failed him at the tactical level, as would later be asserted. On 6 January he wrote to Sir Herbert Stewart as follows:²

On the 8th you will arrange to start yourself with the following force:

*Half Battery Royal Artillery
1 Squadron 19th Hussars
Heavy Camel Regiment
Mounted Infantry Camel Regiment
Headquarters and 400 all ranks, Sussex Regiment
1 Company, 50 men, Essex Regiment
All the Naval Brigade now here
2 Sections Bearer Company
1 Section Moveable Field-hospital
As many transport camels carrying supply as can be provided*

Of this force, you will leave the 50 Essex at El Howeiya, and take on the mounted infantry now there. After such rest as your animals require [at Jakdul], you will proceed to Matemmeh with the following force:

*1 Squadron 19th Hussars
3 Guns Royal Artillery
Guards Camel Regiment
Heavy Camel Regiment
Mounted Infantry Camel Regiment
250 Men Sussex Regiment
Naval Brigade
Detachment Royal Engineers*

and a convoy taking eight day's supply for the force, 25,000 rations for the post at Matemmeh, and 3,000 rations for a post to be established at Abu Klea, as

¹ Wolseley, journal entry 7 Jan. 85; see Preston (ed.), *Relief of Gordon*, 108.

² The date of the orders is established in a letter from Stewart to Wolseley dated Jakdul Wells, 14 Jan. 85; Colvile, OH, i, 247.

hereafter ordered; 400 boxes small-arms ammunition, 1 section if possible, 2 sections, Moveable Field-hospital; 2 sections Bearer Company.

On reaching Abu Klea you will establish a post there garrisoned by from 50 to 100 men, Sussex Regiment, as the nature of the ground may require, 300 rounds per man, and 3,000 rations.

You will then advance on Matemmeh, which you will attack and occupy. For this it may be advisable to laager your convoy at the wells of Shebakat.

Having occupied Metemmeh, you will leave there the Guards Camel Regiment, the detachment Sussex Regiment, the Naval Brigade, detachment Royal Engineers, and three guns Royal Artillery, 25,000 rations, and 300 rounds small-arm ammunition per rifle; and return with the convoy to Jakdul.

You will give strict orders to all officers commanding posts that a cordon is to be established round their several posts, within which no Arabs may be allowed to come.

You will post at all stations a detachment of Mounted Infantry as express riders. For the present it is not advisable that less than four men should be sent with a message. Arrangements should be made to keep a supply of water in each post.

You will be particular to use every endeavour to keep me as well and as quickly informed of your movements as possible [easier said than done]. On your return to Jakdul you will continue to forward stores by convoy to Matemmeh.

It may be necessary for you to leave Jakdul with more camels than you leave Korti with, in that case you will take camels from Colonel Clarke's convoy.

Colonel Sir C. Wilson, DAG [Deputy Adjutant-General], and Captain Verner, DAAG [Deputy Assistant Adjutant-General], will accompany you for intelligence duties. Sir C. Wilson has been directed to show you his instructions. He will be in command of Matemmeh when you leave.¹

Stewart's orders make no reference to despatching Wilson to Khartoum aboard Gordon's steamers, specifying rather that he was to be left in command of Metemmeh. Clearly this was subject to oral amendment. Wilson's orders were written on 7 December, were read to him during the course of the day and handed to him the following morning. The original idea of communicating with Gordon in advance of relieving Khartoum dated from 2 January. As Wolseley prepared Stewart's orders on 6 January, he must have selected Wilson as the most appropriate emissary that evening or early the following morning. It was the news that Colonel Burnaby was now within striking distance of Korti that served to free up Wilson in the role of emissary. Although Burnaby was unlikely to arrive in time for the column's departure, he could give chase and catch up before it pressed on from Jakdul. Burnaby would now command at Metemmeh, while Wilson steamed upriver to see Gordon. Wilson's orders ran as follows:

¹ Ibid, ii, 6-8.

You will accompany the column under the command of Brigadier-General Sir Herbert Stewart, K.C.B., which will leave Korti tomorrow for Matammeh. Your intimate knowledge of Soudan affairs will enable you to be of great use to him during his operations away from these headquarters.

You will endeavour to enter into friendly relations with the Hassaniyeh tribe, and to induce them if possible to carry supplies for us across the desert, and to sell us sheep, cattle, etc.

As soon as Matammeh is in our occupation, Sir H. Stewart will dispatch a messenger to Korti with an account of his march, etc; and you will be good enough to send me by same opportunity all political information you may have obtained, all news of General Gordon, the so-called Mahdi, etc.

I am sending Captain Lord Charles Beresford R.N., with a small party of seamen, to accompany Sir H. Stewart to Matammeh, where, if there any steamers, Lord Charles Beresford will take possession of one or two of them, as he may think best. Any Egyptian (fellaheen) soldiers on them can be converted into camel-drivers and come back here with unloaded camels.

As soon as Lord Charles Beresford reports that he is ready to proceed with one or more steamers to Khartum, you will go to that place with him, and deliver the enclosed letter to General Gordon. I leave it open so you may read it.

Orders have been given to Sir H. Stewart to send a small detachment of infantry with you to Khartum. If you like, you can, upon arriving there, march these soldiers through the city, to show the people that British troops are near at hand. If there is any epidemic in the town you will not do this. I do not wish them to sleep in the city. They must return with you to Matammeh. You will only stay in Khartum long enough to confer fully with General Gordon. Having done so you will return with Lord Charles Beresford in steamers to Matammeh.

My letter to General Gordon will explain to you the object of your mission. You will confer with him both upon the military and upon the political position. You are aware of the great difficulty of feeding this army at such a great distance from the sea. You know how we are off in the matter of supplies, the condition and distribution of the troops under my command, the dates when Major General Earle will be able to move on Abu-Ahmed, etc.

I am sending with you the three officers named in the margin who will accompany you to Khartum, and will remain there to assist General Gordon until I am able to relieve that place.

It is always possible that when Mohamed Ahmed fully realises that an English army is approaching Khartum he will retreat, and thus raise the siege. Khartum would under such circumstances continue to be the political centre of our operations, but Berber would become our military objective. No British troops would be sent to Khartum beyond a few red coats in steamers for the purpose of impressing on the inhabitants the fact that it was to the presence of our army they owed their safety. The siege of Khartum being thus raised, all our

military arrangements would be made with a view to the immediate occupation of Berber, and to a march across the desert to Ariab, on the Suakin road.

Upon arrival at Matammeh, it is very possible you may find papers or letters from General Gordon awaiting us. You will be good enough to send them to me by the first messenger coming here. Upon your return to Matammeh from Khartum you will rejoin my Headquarters at your earliest possible convenience.¹

It was observed in Chapter 2 that while the Official History includes a transcript of Wilson's orders, it fails to incorporate the memorandum from Buller which accompanied them. This is not merely a curious omission, but a suspicious one, as the note is essential to any *bona fide* understanding of how the campaign would have played itself out had it not ended so precipitately. It is unsurprising that Wilson felt no compunction about incorporating the memo into his book:

Deputy Adjutant-General [Wilson]

The following is my estimate of approximate times:

General Earle's force should with luck, be in a position to commence its forward movement on the 20th January. The whole of that force should have moved by the 25th January. It will, I hope, reach Abu-Ahmed about the 10th February, Berber about the 22nd February and Shendy about the 5th of March. I have not calculated on its meeting with any serious opposition before Berber.

Lord Wolseley's force will commence to reach Matammeh the 16th January, and should be concentrated there with sixty day's supplies by the 2nd March. If we hire many camels this date may be anticipated.

*Redvers Buller
Major General²*

From this it can be seen that the final push south from Metemmeh, by a reunified British force, had been projected by the staff for the second week of March. It follows that when the Desert Column marched out of Korti on 8 January 1885, it was not, contrary to popular myth, engaged in a dash for Khartoum. Its mission was to capture Metemmeh. It was not anticipated that it would move south for another six weeks after that. Despite all the fine talk about still being able *in extremis* to push through to Khartoum with the Desert Column, Wolseley's written orders contained no provision for Stewart to assume personal responsibility for dashing south from Metemmeh, should either the intelligence picture or further desperate pleas from Gordon demand decisive action. The orders also require that having been to Khartoum and back, Wilson should then ride all the way back to Korti to make his report.

The absence of any provision for an all-out dash by the Desert Column hints at the possibility that something had changed since the staff conference of 2 January. By

¹ Wilson, *Korti to Khartum*, 300-3.

² Ibid, 303.

jumping to the evening of 8 January, some hours after Stewart's departure, we find Wolseley writing to Lady Louisa in the following vein:

You will see by my journal that I have given up all intention of forcing my way into Khartoum with a small column owing to the warning that Gordon sent me by his messenger. I expect Sir Charles Wilson back here on the 28th instant, having been into Khartoum. He will be able to tell me what Gordon's prospects and wishes really are. In the meantime, I am collecting supplies at Matammeh so as to be prepared for all contingencies. This delay is provoking, but it all leans towards increased safety, or rather, I should say, less risk.¹

It is not clear whether the first line of this passage was literally true. Had Wolseley changed his mind again, by accepting that he could only push through to Khartoum in full-strength, something which could not possibly take place before March? Was there *any* prospect of his leading the Desert Column south from Metemmeh in a daring dash? Unfortunately the evidence is sketchy. We saw earlier that Wolseley, cognizant that any such operation would represent a high-risk venture, had already telegraphed Hartington to seek guidance. He couched the question by saying that he presumed the cabinet would regard the fall of Khartoum and the death of Gordon as a greater calamity than the relief expedition sustaining some kind of reverse in the desert. It is curious that he chose to pose the question in quite this fashion, as he must have known that the government would be bound to take the opposite view: and indeed that is precisely how Hartington replied. In a later letter to his wife, dated 15 January, Wolseley again refers to Wilson getting back to Korti on either 27 or 28 January. Disregarding the projection as absurdly optimistic,² we should note that he then adds the crucial remark, 'On the news he brings will depend all my future movements.'³ This would suggest that he still regarded a dash as something which might eventually be forced upon him by a worsening situation at Khartoum. What is clear, however, is that in the meantime he had no intention of delegating the authority to make a decision to anybody else. This precluded any possibility of Stewart and Wilson conferring, on the latter's return to Metemmeh, and pruning back on wasted time by pressing south without waiting for orders. In terms of the inherent import of the decision, there is no question but that it would ordinarily rest with the army commander; but if the commander was at Korti, not less than four days' journey-time from Metemmeh, then a minimum of nine days would be wasted before a time-critical decision could be implemented.

A brief digression to ponder how current British doctrine views the matter of risk will be instructive. Chapter 6 of *ADP Operations* provides comprehensive guidelines, beginning with reflections on the nature of risk:

Military success comes through the identification of when to take decisive risks, not from a mindset that avoids them....By its very nature, military activity is

¹ Wolseley to his wife, 8 Jan. 85; see Arthur (ed.), *Wolseley Letters*, 153.

² Wilson did not in the end get back to Korti until 9 Feb.

³ Wolseley to his wife, 15 Jan. 85; see Arthur (ed.), *Wolseley Letters*, 155.

about understanding, balancing and taking risks, rather than avoiding hazards. Risk is an expression of the probability and implications of an activity or event, with positive or negative consequences, taking place [a poorly articulated sentence]. It is a measure of the likelihood of something going right or wrong, and the associated impact, good or bad. Therefore risk is a neutral....The acceptance of risk presents real opportunities as well as the potential for grave consequences. Commanders must therefore differentiate between taking calculated risks and gambling. The former provides for changes of course or recovery; the latter only leaves things to chance.¹

Interestingly, because it exactly reflects Wolseley's position at the point under consideration, ADP Operations goes on to reflect on what it terms the 'risk paradox':

A commander needs to deal with the tension between protecting his force and accepting risks that must be taken in order to achieve his objective. The logic involved in such calculations can appear to create a paradox. The more effort spent in trying to reduce risks, the more they may increase. Understanding the environment is the most substantial step to getting this judgement right. Also important is to select and maintain an aim, underpinning it with moral courage.²

Observations at paragraph 0609 on 'Understanding Risk' are of also of relevance in the context of Wolseley's dilemma:

- a. Human perception of risk is underpinned by two components; how much an individual fears a potential outcome, and the extent to which he feels in control of events. In a worst case situation decisions may be made for fear of losing, rather than with any realistic expectation of winning.*
- b. Attitudes towards risk are driven by individual tendencies to pay more attention to information that confirms assumptions or hypotheses than information that contradicts them: and to give disproportionate weight to beliefs that are easily accessible or recalled. This may result in assumptions that techniques or tactics that have worked in the past will automatically work again, even if the situation differs. A further tendency can be to behave as if one can exert control in circumstances where this is highly unlikely.*

¹ ADP Operations, Ch. 6, para. 0606, p. 6-5.

² Ibid, Ch. 6, para. 0608, p. 6-6. This is poorly articulated. As 'selection and maintenance of the aim' is the master principle of war it must by definition be the more 'substantial step' where it is listed as one of two possible 'steps' (wrong word) on offer. In this particular context it is not only theoretically but actually the more substantive measure.

All of the foregoing can be summed up by a sentence from paragraph 0616: 'An unrealistic expectation of avoiding all risks may impact adversely on the accomplishment of the mission....'.

The issue in Wolseley's case appears to hinge on the question of moral courage. Knowing that his campaign plan had faltered, in that there was no longer any practical means of concentrating at Shendy a fighting force of the size he had originally envisaged, in anything like a sufficiently timely fashion, Wolseley had referred the question of acceptable risk to the government. There would have to be at least a vague suspicion that he had done so in the hope that they might expressly prohibit a 'do-or-die' dash, with a force which might prove too weak to accomplish its mission. This the Secretary of State had not done, for the reason that ultimately such *decisions*, (as opposed to *guidance*), must logically always be the preserve of the military commander in the field. A famous precedent had been set by Havelock's reluctant, morally courageous and entirely sound decision to turn about on the road to Lucknow, rather than lead a manifestly inadequate force to certain destruction. Fortunately Lucknow had held on, buying the time for Havelock to be joined by two more battalions, but he had by no means been certain of the garrison's ability to do so when he made his momentous decision.¹ Had Lucknow fallen in the interim, the likelihood is that Havelock's statue would not now be standing in Trafalgar Square, but such is the onerous weight of command responsibility.

The diktats of time were such that the only viable option open to Wolseley was to dash across the last hundred miles with 1,500 men, a high-risk option which would draw deeply on his moral courage. Alternatively, he could disregard the diktats of time, proceed much more methodically, at far less risk, and push through to Khartoum with his combat power concentrated. Such a course would also require moral courage; the moral courage to risk not 1500 men, but his personal reputation, just as Havelock had done. What Wolseley believed he needed in order to make a rational decision was absolute certainty about how long Gordon could hold out. It is in this context that the Wilson mission was conceived. It was intended as an act of communication and nothing more. That it was not intended to represent the relief of Khartoum is manifest; for that would be a moment of crowning glory and was decidedly not something Wolseley would ever delegate to a staff colonel. That gentlemen's studies and schoolrooms around the empire be filled with images of a Gordon-Wilson handshake formed no part of Wolseley's vision.

The practical effect of his orders was to shift to the right any prospect of the Desert Column racing south, in a worst case scenario, by not less than three weeks. It seems clear that while Wolseley recognised that a dash might still be forced upon him, it was indeed to be viewed as an option of last resort. Shrewd as ever, he had, in his own mind at least, raised a political umbrella over the military implications of slowing down; of affording greater priority to safety than rapidity. The new plan imposed an arbitrary timeline for the relief of Khartoum. If Wolseley had one shred of evidence which led him to believe that Gordon could hold out to mid-March, his revised plan might have been vaguely justifiable. But there was no such evidence: there could be no such evidence by reason of the fact that it happened not to be true. Gordon had done

¹ Col. G.B. Malleeson, *The Indian Mutiny of 1857*, (London, 1901), chapters XIV & XVI.

himself no favours by apparently failing to affix a timeline to his message of 14 December. The message had said only, 'We want you to come quickly', whereas 'We want you to come by no later than...' would have been an eminently more meaningful plea. But the long and the short of it was that by the time the ink had dried on Wilson's orders, Gordon was as good as dead.

The final set of instructions was the (grammatically tortuous) set issued to Lord Beresford.

The Section Naval Brigade now here, will march with Sir H. Stewart's convoy on the 8th for Metemmeh. You will report yourself to Sir H. Stewart to receive instructions regarding the march. On arrival at Metemmeh, you will at once take over and man any steamer, or, if you can, steamers that are there or in the vicinity; and you will use every means in your power to put one or more of the steamers that will, it is believed, be available into an efficient state.

You will do this under the direction of the senior military officer at the post, and will take his instructions regarding the steamers when ready.

6.12.3 March of the Desert Column

The Desert Column started for Jakdul Wells at 3.20 *pm* on Thursday 8 January.¹ The commander and staff were out in force to see the troops off. It was an impressive spectacle which served to swell Wolseley's vanity to such an extent that in his journal entry of later that day we encounter him at his narcissistic worst.² It was as if all the worry of the previous few weeks had been unwarranted. Sir Herbert Stewart, his particular favourite, was now on the march at the head of a hand-picked fighting force drawn from across the smartest regiments in the service. It must have seemed to Wolseley that all the work of the past nine months had come to a head and that such endeavour could only be crowned with success. He was so pleased with the events of the day that he was again tempted to despise his enemy: 'I have for long thought the enemy's power was a great bubble that only required pricking with a stout bodkin – a pin would not be strong enough – to collapse entirely.'³ In truth it was all an illusion, as commander and staff had done nothing to sway time and space advantageously, the very issue which had been causing such anguish for the past several weeks. No matter how impressive a spectacle a camel-mounted brigade on the march might be, if the supporting staff computations have been done properly, a real-world military formation can advance no faster than the map-pin which once represented it. In reality, Wolseley had not only failed to take any meaningful measures to accelerate progress, but had, in effect, applied a brake, by inserting the ill-conceived idea of sending Wilson to Khartoum and back, before proceeding with the main order of business. Nor had he done anything to concentrate his combat power to a single decisive purpose. Instead, after toying briefly with diverting the infantry across the Bayūda in support of Stewart, he had on second thoughts reverted to his original plan,

¹ War-diary entry 8 Jan. 85.

² See Preston (ed.), *Relief of Gordon*, 108-112.

³ Wolseley, journal entry 8 Jan. 85; *Ibid*, 111.

a plan which failed properly to frame and then address the most pressing operational factor.

The marching out state of the Desert Column is at Table 3. The figures cited are drawn from the war-diary of the Desert Column and ought to be accurate.¹ It is curious that MICR is said to have paraded 21 officers & 336 NCOs and men on the day of departure, as the highest unit strength cited during the campaign is 24 & 366, and 4 officers & 58 NCOs & men of C Company were already at Hambok.²

	Offrs	NCOs & Men	Natives	Camels	Horses
Horses					
Army HQ	3	3	8	11	
Stewart's HQ	5	3	5	15	5
Naval Bde	5	53	11	91	
19th Hussars	9	121	19	73	146
HCR	24	376	5	420	
MICR	21	336	4	424	
1st Royal Sussex	16	401	7	42	4
2nd Essex	3	55	2	58	
1/1 Battery, S.D., RA	4	39	8	90	
C & T Corps	5	72	160	431	
No. 1 Fd. Hosp.	1	10	6	27	
Medical Bearer Coy	2	40	57	146	
Total	98	1,509	296	2,228	155

Table 3: Marching-out State, Korti, 8 January

Assuming that the strength of MICR is overstated by something around 25-30 NCOs and men, then counting the 437 men at Jakdul, and the 61 MICR men already deployed, Stewart would have just over 2,000 men under his command. Because 1st Royal Sussex had only seven companies in the field,³ Captain William Carter's company of 2nd Essex had been incorporated to complete a full-strength battalion. For the time being, the infantry companies had been mounted on a combination of vacant GCR camels and less heavily laden baggage-animals.

6.12.4 Stewart's Second March to Jakdul Wells

The column moved off 'amid a chorus of good wishes',⁴ at which juncture there were 16 days remaining before the fall of Khartoum. As we have seen the distance from Korti to Metemmeh was 174 miles, from Metemmeh to Khartoum all but a hundred

¹ The overall totals of officers, men and animals are identical to the figures cited in the Official History; see Colvile, OH, ii, 6.

² Stewart to Wolseley, 14 Jan. 85; see Colvile, OH, ii, 250.

³ B-H Companies inclusive.

⁴ Beresford, *Memoirs*, i, 254.

more. Although Stewart had already driven his camels hard to cover 198 miles in six days, it did not follow that he would now be able to cover 272 miles in a mathematically feasible eight or nine days. This was dictated not only by the deteriorating condition of the camels, but by the fact that this time the enemy knew he was coming.

If it was at least theoretically possible for the Desert Column to make it to Khartoum in 16 days, (thus to arrive on 24 January, a whole day before it fell), there were five factors in play which guaranteed that this would never be so. First, instead of Metemmeh being bypassed to the south, on a right oblique from Abu Klea Wells, Wolseley's orders required that it be stormed. With 3,000 anṣār known to be *in situ* this was certain to consume time and in all likelihood prove costly. Second, because the desert march had been compromised so far in advance, the enemy commanders were already deploying forces to resist it. Though the British did not yet know it, this meant that they would have to fight their way across the Bayūda. This would also be time-consuming, costly and fraught with peril. Third, there was every danger that the near-approach of a relief column would drive the enemy high command to order an assault on a teetering Khartoum. Fourth and fundamentally, dashing 272 miles is not what Wolseley's orders required Stewart to do; even if there was a battlefield triumph and Metemmeh fell quickly, the orders called not for rapid exploitation of success, but rather for a continued logistic build-up and a cautious exploratory mission which could not fail to consume an additional fortnight. Finally, Stewart had not been granted any freedom to act at discretion: nothing in his orders envisaged a scenario in which the Desert Column would immediately advance south from Metemmeh. This would be the army commander's business alone; and he was set to remain dislocated at Korti for the foreseeable future. Viewed from any conceivable perspective, when the Desert Column left Korti, the game was already up. In other words, and herein lies a vital point, the operational level constraints were such that there was nothing that could be done at the tactical level to affect the now inexorable course of Sudanese history.

Stewart was accompanied by his usual cabal of staff officers and three members of the Intelligence Department, its chief and two of his six assistants, Major John Dickson and Captain Willoughby Verner. Of the other intelligence officers, Colville was at Merowe, Kitchener was at Jakdul, Stuart-Wortley had gone ahead with Clarke¹ and Turner had taken over Wilson's duties at army headquarters. There were also nine war-correspondents with the column.² It made about nine miles, before approaching darkness terminated the proceedings at 6.00 *pm*. Although it had not been an arduous march, Lieutenant Percy Marling was beginning to have doubts about how the camels were likely to fare in the days ahead: 'Started from Korti at 1 p.m. [sic]. The camels kept breaking down. I don't think they will stick it, they are already losing condition,

¹ Macdonald, *Too Late*, 175.

² Bennet Burleigh (*Daily Telegraph*), Melton Prior (*Illustrated London News*), Frederic Villiers (*Graphic*), John Cameron (*Standard*), Charles Williams (*Daily Chronicle*), St. Leger Herbert (*Morning Post*), Alexander Macdonald (*Western Morning News*), Harry Pearse (*Daily News*), and Walter Ingram, the son of Sir William Ingram the proprietor of the *ILN*.

and consequently getting fearfully sore backs; some of them have holes you can put your fist into.’¹

The next leg of the march commenced at 1.30 *am* and continued until 9.30 *am*, when a breakfast halt was called at the Wādī Abu Gir. At 2.00 *pm* they were off again, marching through a hot Friday afternoon until 5.45 *pm*. With darkness approaching Stewart brought the column to a halt in a rugged valley with a good covering of grass. Although there was very little *dhura* being carried with the column, turning the camels out to graze could not be countenanced and they were knee-haltered *en masse* as usual. Reveille was meant to be sounded by HCR at 1.20 *am*, but for some unknown reason was 40 minutes late.² There was again some difficulty in getting underway and the column twice missed its way in the early morning gloom.

The wells at Hambok were reached not long after sun-up on Saturday, but were good for only, ‘a few cupfuls of water’.³ The general decided to push nine miles further on to Howeyiat. Some of the Royal Sussex companies had already run low on water. Airlie was probably being less than charitable in attributing their plight to indiscipline, when he noted in the war-diary that, ‘some of this Regiment had used more than was allowed’. A more compelling explanation is offered by Wilson in *From Korti to Khartum*. Because the Royal Sussex had never been intended for mounted duty, they received an issue of water-skins only at the last moment, by which time the pick of the items had gone to the camel regiments, leaving only a residue which were in poor condition and inclined to leak. Verner adds in his account that the Royal Sussex had not been provided with skins on the same scale as the camel regiments.⁴

Sir Charles Wilson rode on ahead of the column and arrived at Howeyiat just in time to see Clarke’s convoy disappearing over a distant ridgeline. Predictably the wells had been drunk dry. Having pressed ahead of the main body overnight, Colonel Barrow and the 19th Hussars had been in residence beside Fetherstonhaugh and his riflemen for some hours. The rest of the column came up at about 10.00 *am*⁵ and was halted just short of the wells, so that there would be time for them to recharge from the water table. A quantity of reserve water was issued out from the 40-gallon tanks with the baggage-train, so that the troops could wash down their hardtack with tea. At length the men were marched across to the wells by companies to take a modest drink of muddy water. Although the fighting troops behaved faultlessly, maintaining order when it came to the turn of the native drivers proved a challenge.⁶ While Fetherstonhaugh’s men were delighted to be re-joining MICR, the 2nd Essex men (2 & 55) could not have been thrilled at being left behind in so remote a spot. It was 90 minutes before the rear-guard⁷ arrived, suggesting that there had been a good deal of trouble with broken-down camels.

As the passage of Clarke’s convoy had left Stewart without the wherewithal to water his own animals, he decided to divert into the Abu Halfā the following day Valley

¹ Marling, *Rifleman and Hussar*, 130.

² War-diary entry 10 Jan. 85.

³ Wilson, *Korti to Khartum*, 5.

⁴ Whitaker (ed.), *Verner Diary*, 29.

⁵ War-diary entry 10 Jan. 85.

⁶ Wilson, *Korti to Khartum*, 5-6.

⁷ Maj. Lord Arthur Somerset’s No. 2 Company HCR.

and take on water there. The 19th Hussars departed not long after noon,¹ followed by the main body at 2.30 *pm*.² Stewart led his brigade past some hills on the left, across 'a plain of black flints'³ and on through another hot afternoon until, with darkness closing in, he caught sight of campfires in the distance. Convinced that he was looking at Clarke's encampment, Stewart decided to press on through the gloom in order to be able to bivouac in front. Wilson noted that without the moon illuminating the desert, night-marching quickly turned into an ordeal. 'The way in which the unfortunate camels tumbled about in the dark, and loads came off, and the strong language that was used, were things to see and hear.' A treacherous stretch of rough ground brought the march to a precipitate halt long before the campfires had been circumvented. It turned out, in the end, that they were not Clarke's, but Barrow's. There was little choice on so dark a night but to bivouac in column of route. By Verner's estimation the position was about 67 miles from Korti. At no point to date had the rate of advance topped 2½ miles in the hour. Infantry of course will generally move at 3-4 mph.

Reveille on Sunday 11 January was sounded 90 minutes in advance of a 4.00 *am* start.⁴ As usual Barrow pushed his horsemen on ahead of everybody else.⁵ A gruelling five-hour march ensued. Marling's diary notes for the day were typically succinct but convey a great deal: 'Camels breaking down in all directions, and the native drivers falling down and shrieking for water.'⁶ After a 90-minute breakfast halt, the next leg of the journey began at 11.00 *am*.⁷ At the appropriate point, near a low rocky hill, the line of march swung sharply towards the 'prettily wooded' valley of Abu Halfā. The wells were reached at 2.00 *pm*. While the quantity of water available would have amply serviced a passing caravan, once again there was nothing like enough for a brigade of camel-borne troops.⁸ Wilson was struck by the quiet professionalism of MICR, 'all old soldiers, looked after by picked officers,' as he put it.⁹ The NCOs had taken particular care to ensure that the men's 7-gallon water-skins were sound to begin with and properly maintained thereafter. From the moment the column left Korti, the MICR companies were permitted to drink only by the order of their captains. In consequence the regiment experienced none of the hardship endured by the Royal Sussex. Wilson noted that Gough's men still had a good deal of water left when they reached the end of the journey. It is perhaps worth stating in passing that such seemingly minor points will have relevance when the thesis comes to address alternate courses of action.

Although Jakdul was now only a few hours march away, Stewart did not intend moving off on the final leg until sun-up the following morning. This was excellent news as far as Wilson was concerned, as he had already seen more than enough night-marching to conclude that it constituted bad practice. He decided to raise the matter

¹ Colvile, OH, ii, 250.

² War-diary entry 10 Jan. 85.

³ Whitaker (ed.), Verner Diary, 29.

⁴ War-diary entry 11 Jan. 85.

⁵ *Sir H. Stewart's Report on his Second March to Jakdul*, 14 Jan. 85; Colvile, OH, ii, 250.

⁶ Marling, *Rifleman and Hussar*, 130.

⁷ War-diary entry 11 Jan. 85.

⁸ Wilson, *Korti to Khartum*, 8-9.

⁹ *Ibid*, 9.

with Stewart during the course of the afternoon and attempt to dissuade him from ordering any more such marches:

He [Stewart] says truly that the camels march much better at night, and that men and camels suffer from the heat when they march by day. I contend that sleep by day is not so refreshing as sleep by night for the men; that when the camels are loaded in the dark the loads are badly put on, and that sore backs are started before the loads can be properly adjusted by daylight; that owing to the constant long halts, necessary to keep the column together in the dark, the loads remain on the camels backs for an excessively long time, fifteen or sixteen hours out of the twenty-four; that the camels start on empty stomachs, contrary to the habit of the beast; that much harm is done to the camels by marching in close order, in the dark over rough ground; that the camels get neither rest or food; and that the men cannot stand marching from 2 A.M. to 10 or 11 A.M. with nothing inside them. I cannot think why we violate all the dictates of common sense in our treatment of the camel, and believe we should get much more out of ours if we worked them as the Arabs do...

....ours are failing before we have commenced, simply because we will not give them time to feed, and when in camp tie them down so tightly they cannot move. I do not think more than 500 camels should ever travel together, and 300 would be a safer limit. It would be heresy to say the camelry [sic] is a mistake; but if Tommy Atkins cannot march in such a climate as this, we had better give up fighting.¹

Although these were telling arguments, Wilson fails to indicate how Stewart responded to them.

Reveille on Monday 12 January came at 4.15 *am* and the start at 6.00 *am*. It was about 12 miles to Jakdul and an abundant supply of water. While the camel regiments and baggage-train moved out with the dawn, the cavalry squadron stayed on to water its ponies and only departed at 12.45 *pm*.² By 10.30 *am* the main body had completed the journey and arrived at Jakdul to find that the Guards had been hard at work. The regimental camping grounds were neatly marked with signboards and had been cleared of stones. There were also three stone forts on commanding high points; Fort Stewart, Fort Boscawen and Fort Flagstaff. Dorward had succeeded in bringing water down through the rocks to a mud trough long enough to permit 50 camels to be watered simultaneously. Gleichen had made a particularly useful contribution by wandering past Dorward's 'upper' pool to discover that there were two others, holding around 320,000 gallons, further up the gorge.³

Colonel Clarke and his men had reached Jakdul at 3.30 *pm* the previous day and proceeded to occupy a zariba, built by the Guards in readiness for their arrival, astride the caravan road. They had spent the rest of the day bringing relays of camels down the track to be watered. On Monday morning, Clarke's camels had again been

¹ Ibid, 9-11.

² Sir H. Stewart's Report on his Second March to Jakdul dated 14. Jan. 85; see Colville, OH, ii, 250.

³ Official report by Maj. James Dorward RE, *Work Done at the Jakdul Wells*; see Colville, OH, ii, 252.

watered. Now, over the course of Monday afternoon and evening, it was the turn of the long-suffering animals with the main body. The Guards were standing by to manage the operation and did sterling work over the course of about seven hours, toiling even by lamplight at the end to ensure that all 2,500 camels were attended to. Wilson and Verner tracked down Kitchener at his cave and spent much of the afternoon talking the intelligence picture through with him.¹ Having daily scoured the desert with a handful of hussars and the Ambukol guides, he had succeeded in capturing a few more prisoners but had gleaned no significant new intelligence. Wilson was obliged during the course of their long talk to break the unwelcome news that it was Lord Wolseley's express wish that Kitchener should return to Korti.

Stewart now outlined the next phase of his plan.² The following day, Tuesday 13 January, would be given over to watering, feeding and resting the animals, recharging water containers and a miscellany of other preparations. At some point GCR would need to take its camels back from 1st Royal Sussex. Colonel Vandeleur was to assume command of the post and take over the forts from GCR. He would have three of his seven companies available to him or 8 officers & 150 bayonets. Major Sunderland would go on with the larger wing of 8 officers & 250 bayonets. Clarke and his LCR detachments would depart for Korti first thing on Wednesday morning, while the main body would begin its march to the Nile at 2.00 *pm* the same day. It was anticipated that the column would next see a fresh supply of water at Abu Klea Wells on Friday 16 January and that the attack on Metemmeh would take place on Sunday.³ It will be as well to remind ourselves that Verner's diary records that Wilson's journey to Khartoum was still at this point, 'a profound secret from all.'⁴ When Vandeleur came to assigning troops to task, he decided that his D, E and H Companies would stay behind, and that B (Major George Harden), C (Captain Lionel Trafford), F (Major Arthur Gern) and G (Major Marsden Sunderland) Companies would be the ones to go on.⁵

Tuesday was duly consumed by the flurry of administrative preparations for the march. The division of the baggage-camels was supervised by Assistant Commissary-General Nugent. In addition to the animals already allocated as regimental transport, some 1,118 others were subsumed into Nos. 9 and 11 Transport Companies, the nominal organisations which together made up the baggage-train. There were more than enough baggage-camels left over for all the men in Sunderland's half-battalion to be provided with animals of their own, but Stewart knew that Buller had next to no camels left at Korti and decided to send as many as possible back with Clarke. This meant that for the time being some 256 of Nugent's 1,118 animals would have to carry not only a standard load of bully-beef or biscuit, but would also have a member of the Royal Sussex perched on top.⁶ Everybody's spirits received a lift mid-afternoon, when the celebrated CO of the Blues rode in at the head of a small *dhura* convoy. When Conductor Joseph Pritchard walked across to greet Burnaby and take responsibility for

¹ Whitaker (ed.), Verner Diary, 34.

² War-diary entry 12 Jan. 85.

³ *Sir H. Stewart's Report on his Second March to Jakdul*, dated 14 Jan. 85; see Colvile, OH, ii, 248.

⁴ Whitaker (ed.), Verner Diary, 35. The passage in question refers to 13 Jan.

⁵ Trafford MS.

⁶ Macdonald, *Too Late*, 208.

the baggage animals, he was greeted with the question, 'Am I in time for the fighting?'¹ In logistic terms the arrival of the *dhura* was crucial, as it permitted Stewart's animals to be properly fed before departing Jakdul. Lord Cochrane estimated that since leaving Korti the camels had each consumed about 16lb of grain and not quite twice that amount of 'dry wiry grass' of negligible nutritional value.² Gleichen wrote that, 'the camels had to sustain themselves on mimosa shoots and long, dry yellow grass, a hundredweight of which would barely produce a pound of nourishment.'³ In other words the camels were already malnourished by the time they reached Jakdul. Such was the shortage of transport that it was decided that the 125 animals brought in by Burnaby would be used for to carry stores, rather than ferrying a bulk supply of fodder forward with the column. Sufficient *dhura* would be distributed for each man to move out with two feeds of eight pounds in the grain-sack on his saddle.⁴ The balance would have to be left behind.

6.12.5 Final Composition of the Fighting Echelon

The marching-out state of the Desert Column on departing Jakdul Wells is at Table 4. It consisted ostensibly of 2,153 souls, of whom 1,802 were British military personnel. In addition there was also the cabal of war-correspondents, with an unknown number of servants and drivers. Allowing for pressmen and retainers, the all up total of human souls was around 2,200.

	Offrs	NCOs & Men	Natives	Camels	Horses
Horses					
HQ Staff	10	6	13	26	5
Naval Bde	5	53	11	91	
19th Hussars	8	127	19	73	155
HCR	24	376	5	420	
GCR	19	365		406	
MICR	24	359	4	424	
1st Royal Sussex	8	250	4		2
1/1 Battery, S.D., RA	4	39	20	90	
26 Fd. Coy, RE	2	25	4	40	
Medical Bearer Coy	2	40	57	146	
No. 1 Fd. Hosp.	2	20	12	54	
C & T Corps	7	33	202	1,118	
Total	115	1,687	351	2,888	162

Table 4: Marching-out State, Jakdul, 14 January⁵

¹ Wright, *Life of Burnaby*, 267.

² Dundonald, *My Army Life*, 30.

³ Gleichen, *With the Camel Corps*, 105.

⁴ Ibid, 106.

⁵ The figures cited at the table are derived from the Official History (ii, 254).

At 7.00 *am* on Wednesday 14 January, Clarke moved out for Korti with his LCR detachments, 500 un-laden baggage-camels and a seething Kitchener. Stewart's fighting force spent the day watering its animals unit by unit and moving out to a rendezvous point, about two miles from the camp, in readiness for a 2.00 *pm* start.

6.12.6 Jakdul Wells to Abu Klea

Although the column marched 'over a vast gravelly plain, with gentle undulations'¹ for only four hours, Airlie's war-diary entry for that day incorporates the remark, 'Sussex camels very bad,' indicating that even over the course of about ten miles the double load of baggage and rider was too much for some animals. At sunset the column halted to eat and snatch a few hours' sleep. As usual supper was preceded by the tedious task of unloading all the baggage-camels and laying a few handfuls of *dhura* under their noses. The night was pitch-black before the soldiers were able to attend to their own needs.

The following day's march began at first light.² At 10.30 *am* Stewart was obliged to call an hour-long halt in order for the rear-guard company to catch up,³ an indicator that yet more overburdened camels had given up the ghost. The march was resumed at 11.30 *am*, only for the problems with Sunderland's camels to become even more marked. Verner noted in his diary, 'In the afternoon the camels began to drop in the most alarming manner, chiefly those ridden by the Sussex men which carried two boxes of beef or biscuit, as well as their riders. Several of the Mounted Infantry camels, which have always been well looked after, dropped dead. This is a tolerably good gauge of the general condition of the brutes and makes one anxious to get to a place where they can rest a bit and get food.'⁴ Stewart called a halt to a long day's march at 5.20 *pm*⁵ and bivouacked about 34 miles from Jakdul and half a mile west of the Jabal Sergain.⁶

Friday 16 January began with a 3.00 *am* reveille and a 5.00 *am* start. The column ran into rough ground almost immediately and Wilson again noted the camels 'tumbling' about amidst 'high tufts of grass'. 'When daylight broke', he continued, 'we found ourselves on a vast plain, scantily clad with savas grass, with the hills of Abu Klea ahead of us in the distance.'⁷ Out in front, the 19th Hussars had been divided between an advanced patrol under Major John French and the squadron main body under Colonel Barrow. At about 9.00 *am* French spotted a small party of camel-mounted Arabs and gave chase. The pursuit took the patrol over the divide and into the Abu Klea Valley, where French had a close shave in attempting to ride down a prisoner.⁸

¹ Gleichen, *With the Camel Corps*, 108.

² Wilson, *Korti to Khartum*, 17.

³ War-diary entries 14 & 15 Jan. 85.

⁴ Whitaker (ed.), Verner Diary, 36.

⁵ War-diary entry 15 Jan. 85.

⁶ Whitaker (ed.), Verner Diary, 37.

⁷ Wilson, *Korti to Khartum*, 18.

⁸ Wilson, (Ibid, 19), describes the incident without identifying the officer. Gleichen (*With the Camel Corps*, 118) makes reference to what can only be the same incident but this time attributes it: 'Craven I

Over the course of the next hour, he ascertained that there was a significant Mahdīst force deployed astride the route to the wells.

6.13 ENEMY IN FRONT

At about 10.30 *am* the main column halted for breakfast. Harry Pearse's report for the *Daily News* indicates that the sound of distant firing was heard at this time.¹ At about 11.15 *am* Barrow rode in to report that his squadron was in contact a few miles short of Abu Klea.² Macdonald and Cameron went to see what was afoot and were greeted by Sir Herbert with, 'Well, gentlemen, the enemy is ahead of us. Barrow has exchanged shots with his outposts, and I am going to attack him at once.' Macdonald noted that he uttered the words with a, 'tone of quiet determination'. With that the general gathered his staff and began sketching his plan into the sand with his swagger-stick.³ As soon as the force had formed up, the general led off in the direction of the high ground. He remained with the main body until it was within 400 yards of the divide, at which point he gave the order to halt and rode ahead to reconnoitre with an entourage of staff officers and correspondents.⁴ French in the meantime had skirmished with enemy horsemen for control of the defile,⁵ had driven them off and had since pushed a number of patrols into the valley to size up the enemy's strengths and dispositions.⁶

The most obvious feature within the confines of the broad, grey-black valley was a sandy-bottomed *khōr* of several miles in length. Looking directly along the line of the valley, Stewart could see that the flanks were strongly held and that the high-ground positions supported a blocking position in the valley floor. The main *khōr* ran down the centre of the valley for about two miles, until it merged with a second watercourse which ran into it from the left at a prominent junction. Running broadly south from this point was another four miles or so of grey-black valley, its sides much lower lying on the left than the right, before the stripe of sand running through the landscape finally petered out in the vicinity of the wells. Just in front of their confluence, the two major watercourses were separated by a gravel spit, atop which there were a score of Qur'anic flags.⁷ It was clear that this marked the centre of the Mahdīst position and obvious that the enemy intended denying the wells to their rear.

think it was'. Gleichen appears to have been wrong, however. Macdonald (*Too Late*, 213) emphatically identifies the officer as French; it seems clear that he was told the story by French in person. Verner (Diary, 37) confirms that French pursued a party of camel-mounted Arabs across the divide and into the valley where, 'some spearmen rose out of the grass and attempted to cut them off.'

¹ See the 23 Jan. 85 edition of the *Western Mail* which reproduces Pearse's report verbatim.

² Whitaker (ed.), Verner Diary, 37.

³ Macdonald, *Too Late*, 215-6.

⁴ Harry Pearse, *Daily News* report cited in the *Western Mail*, 23 Jan. 85.

⁵ Williams, *Daily Chronicle* report of 18 Jan. 85, published 25 Feb. 85.

⁶ Macdonald, *Too Late*, 214.

⁷ The only sources to state a quantity of flags are Cameron's report for the *Evening Standard*, cited also in the *Yorkshire Gazette*, 23 Jan. 85, and Pearse's report for the *Daily News*, cited in the *Western Mail* on the same date.

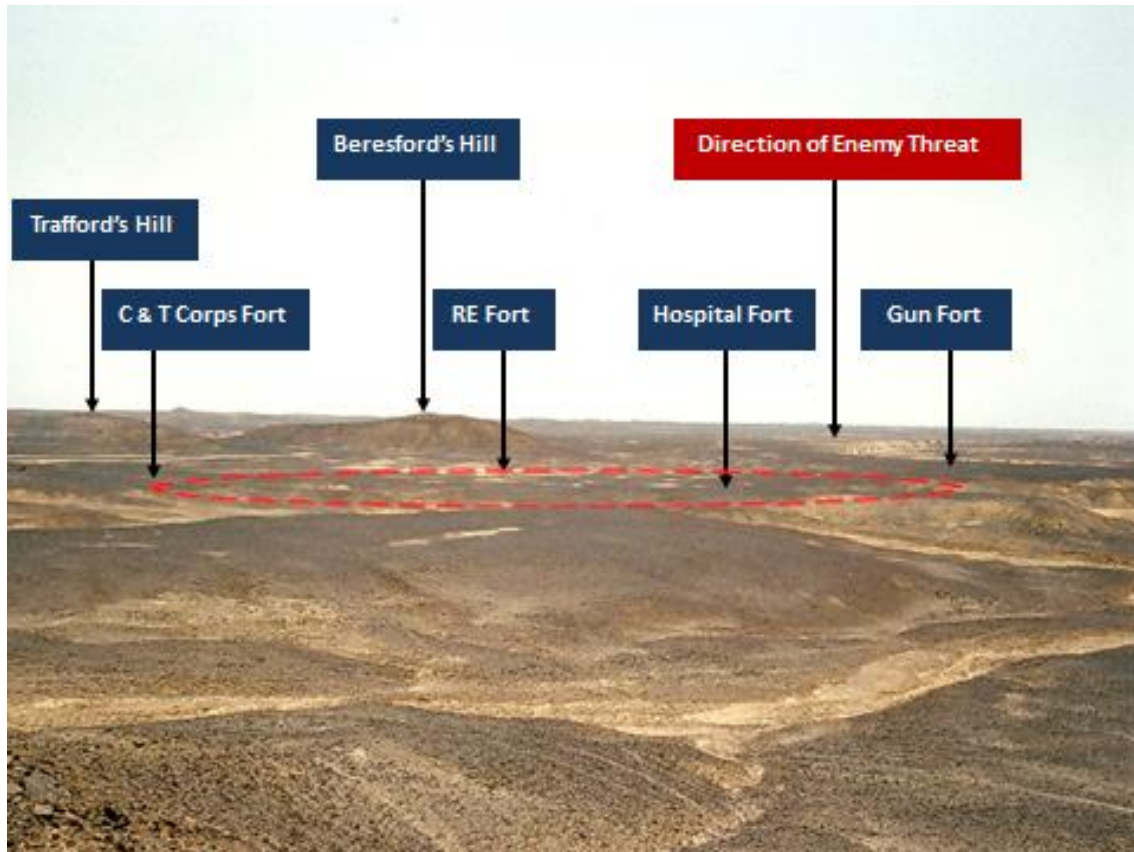


Illustration 3: Zariba Position at Abu Klea

The 'zariba' position in which the British overnighted was about a mile from the Mahdīst blocking position in the valley. Musa wad Hīlū, the army commander, had interposed his force between Stewart's column and the next available water at the wells three miles to the south. The perimeter was protected by 50-man outposts atop the features labelled Beresford's Hill and Trafford's Hill. [Image Source: Fieldwork Phase, 2009.]

It was too early to tell whether or not they would take the offensive, but if they stayed where they were Stewart would eventually be obliged to fight his way to water. There was a conversation between the general and Burnaby over whether, with only about three hours of daylight remaining, it would be advisable to attack immediately or wait for morning. Burnaby thought it best to wait, advice which Stewart was content to accept.¹ The immediate imperative was to secure a strong defensive position in which to sit out the hours of darkness.

6.14 LEAD INTO CHAPTER 7

The next chapter analyses the tactical denouement of the campaign including the Battles of Abu Klea and Abu Kru, the intervening night-march, the abortive operation against Metemmeh and the steamer dash. The chapter will place particular emphasis on how the command transitioned between Stewart and Wilson, and how Sir Charles

¹ Macdonald, *Too Late*, 219.

performed once he had inherited the role of GOC. One of the chapter's essential strands is establishing the intelligence picture as the British role-players understood it at the time, on the grounds that it was to exert a vital but little understood bearing on tactical decision-making. That this did not exert a fatal effect on outcome, indeed that it could never have done so, has already been demonstrated.

Chapter 7

THE TACTICAL LEVEL DENOUEMENT

7.1 THE MAHDĪST PERSPECTIVE

We have seen that Gordon's valedictory letter to Watson predicted that Khartoum would fall between Christmas and the New Year. The reason that it did not is that the starving soldiery somehow survived on such sorry fare as cats, rats and tree-gum. That they continued to resist, even after matters had come to such a pass, was a function of three things: their faith in their enigmatic commander, their fear of the Mahdīst host and, above all else, assurances that the British were at hand. On the other side of the White Nile, Muḥammad Aḥmad had been kept well briefed by his spies and had no intention of taking the city by bloody storm, when a limp capitulation was both inevitable and well-nigh imminent. His approach was derived from the precedent of the siege of El Obeid, the provincial capital of Kordofan, where a rash assault mounted on 8 September 1882 had resulted in thousands of casualties.¹ The repulse had come close to compromising his credibility as the divinely guided one. He had evaded exposure only by publicly berating his commanders for not following the most acute details of their orders, orders which had originated, he claimed, with the Prophet himself.²

When Ali-wad-Saad, the Amīr of Metemmeh, sent in the news that the British were crossing the Bayūda, the Mahdī despatched a force of 5,000 Kordofanis from the Daghaim, Kināna and Hamr tribes³ to confront them in the desert. Command of the blocking force was vested in the Amīr Mūsā wad Ḥilū,⁴ a brother of the Khalīfa Alī wad Ḥilū,⁵ (one of the Mahdī's three topmost lieutenants). Two days later, another 2,000 Kordofanis departed the rebel encampment at Omdurman, under the command of the Amīr Al-Nūr Muḥammad 'Anqara,⁶ a turncoat colonel of irregulars who had capitulated at Bāra two years earlier. Something around 5,000 local men from Berber and Metemmeh, under the Amīrs 'Abd-al-Mājid Nasr al-Din abū'l-Kailak and Ali-wad-Saad respectively, a combination of Ja'liyyīn, Awadiyeh, 'Abābda and Barabra tribesmen, were also involved in resisting Stewart's advance, first at Abu Klea (Abū Ṭulaiḥ), on 17 January, and then at Abu Kru (Abū Kurū), two days later.⁷

¹ Rudolf C. Slatin Pasha CB, *Fire and Sword in the Sudan*, (4th Edn., London & New York, 1896), 174-5.

² The scene was witnessed by the captive Father Ohrwalder.

³ Slatin, *Fire and Sword*, 338.

⁴ For biographical detail see Hill, *Biographical Dictionary*, 284.

⁵ For biographical detail; Ibid, 47.

⁶ For biographical detail; Ibid, 297. Note that while Hill states that Nūr 'Anqara had been in command at Bāra, Slatin, a primary source well placed to know, mentions him as one of three senior officers at the town. The commandant according to Slatin was one Surur Effendi.

⁷ This description of Mahdīst forces committed to the Bayūda is a collation derived from Slatin's *Fire and Sword*, Wilson's intelligence report on Abu Klea, his official and supplementary despatches on Abu Kru, *From Korti to Khartum*, and entries in Verner's diary. In the case of Wilson and Verner they based their data on the questioning of defectors and prisoners. Slatin was a prisoner in the Mahdī's camp.

According to the Faqī Medawi,¹ a prominent Mahdīst who later changed sides, news of Abu Klea arrived at Omdurman on 20 January.² A worried Muḥammad Aḥmad first had a 101-gun salute fired, to suggest both to his own people and to the besieged garrison that the victory had been his. But the wailing of the Kordofani women was so terrible that nobody was taken in.³ Later that afternoon the Mahdī is said to have convened a council of Khalīfas and other notables. Accounts of the proceedings are not consistent. According to the Faqī Medawi's hearsay version, the Mahdī advised the council that the Prophet had again appeared to him, to command that the faithful should fall back into Kordofan. The story continues to the effect that only the rhetoric of the Mahdī's uncle, Muḥammad 'Abd-al-Karīm, who argued in favour of an immediate assault, dissuaded his nephew from ordering a retreat. Linked to this version is the suggestion that the final decision to attack was not made until 25 January, (i.e. the daytime hours immediately preceding the night assault). The decision is linked in its turn to the arrival of a messenger from Metemmeh to report that two steamers had set out for Khartoum, (which we know occurred at about 8.00 *am* on 24 January). The Faqī Medawi's source for the first part of the story was its hero, Muḥammad 'Abd-al-Karīm. Arguably this might imply great authenticity, or alternatively could be taken to hint at the possibility of an exercise in self-aggrandizement. Under the Medawi construct, the news of the steamers' departure would appear to have travelled impossibly quickly across a distance of 98 miles. Similarly the subsequent attack would have to have been developed in matter of hours.

Rudolf Slatin, on the other hand, who is likewise a hearsay witness in terms of the proceedings themselves, states that a council of war did indeed take place immediately after the arrival of the news from Abu Klea, (which he places on the afternoon of 21 January), but makes no mention of procrastination. Instead he states that the council's outcome was an emphatic decision to attack.⁴ Under the Slatin construct, the attack decision is delinked from steamer movement and attached instead to the defeat at Abu Klea, with the result that 3½ days become available for Mahdīst planning and preparation. Certainly the latter postulation appears to be the more militarily credible, if nothing else because the attack entailed a major river crossing by night and cannot have been thrown together in a matter of hours. Ultimately, however, the evidence is insufficiently strong to pronounce one way or the other.

Whatever the truth behind how and when the decision was arrived at, all that matters in the end is that Mahdīst resolve remained firm. On the night 25/26 January,

¹ See Wingate, *Mahdiism*, 191-3. Importantly Medawi's account was recorded by the Cairo Intelligence Department at a time when they were actively engaged in suborning the Mahdīst regime, in which context the notion that Muḥammad Aḥmad had been in some way lily-livered would have made for an admirable propaganda line.

² Note that Slatin places the arrival of the news 'six days after the fall of Omdurman', which he identifies as 15 Jan; see *Fire and Sword*, 338. There is thus some doubt as to whether the news arrived on 20 or 21 Jan. Both dates seem slow for a battle fought only 98 miles away on 17 Jan. Thus the earlier date is ostensibly the more credible.

³ Slatin, *Fire and Sword*, 338.

⁴ *Ibid*, 339.

the Amīr ‘Abd-al-Raḥmān wad al-Najūmi ferried thousands of anṣār across the White Nile and infiltrated them around the exposed western end of the South Front, Gordon, for his part, had observed the Mahdīst preparations during the course of the afternoon, correctly divined their meaning and toured the defences to ensure that the garrison was alive to the coming crisis. It was 3.00 *a.m.* before the rebels emerged from the *jazīra* to assail the South Front. Gordon seems to have fought a gun from the roof of the *sarāya*, apparently clad in his shirtsleeves, until he could no longer depress the barrel sufficiently, at which point he went downstairs to dress properly, before re-joining the fray.¹ There are several conflicting reports of his death, most of which portray him going down fighting. Purported eyewitness accounts notwithstanding, G. W. Joy’s iconic painting has guaranteed that he will forever be remembered passively awaiting his martyrdom at the head of the palace stairs.

It will be recalled that the Desert Column began its crossing of the Bayūda on 8 January. The general outline of events given above serves to confirm the validity of an important assertion made in the last chapter; namely that there was nothing Sir Herbert Stewart, or Sir Charles Wilson subsequently, could have done to avert the fall of Khartoum. By the New Year the physical condition of the garrison was in a downwards spiral, worsening with each passing day, until malnutrition had rendered it all but incapable of mounting serious resistance. The costly British victories at Abu Klea and Abu Kru merely hastened a *coup de grace* which, had it not been for the Mahdī’s understandable caution, might have been delivered at any point in the preceding three weeks. Wilson reached the confluence of the Niles and came within sight of the *sarāya* on the morning of 28 January. Even when Wolseley was still penning optimistic journal entries, the earliest date he had projected for the relief of Khartoum was 31 January. Chapter 6 demonstrated that by the time he launched Stewart he had given up this timeline as unrealistic, while Buller’s memo to Wilson projected the combined advance of the Desert and River Columns for early March. That Wilson actually reached Khartoum in advance of the army commander’s original and unrealistic timetable has been lost in the noise. Even this was not enough to keep Wolseley’s vindictiveness in check. The subsequent ‘Wilson Controversy’, which arose despite the clear-cut inevitability of strategic failure, compels consideration of the campaign’s tactical level denouement.

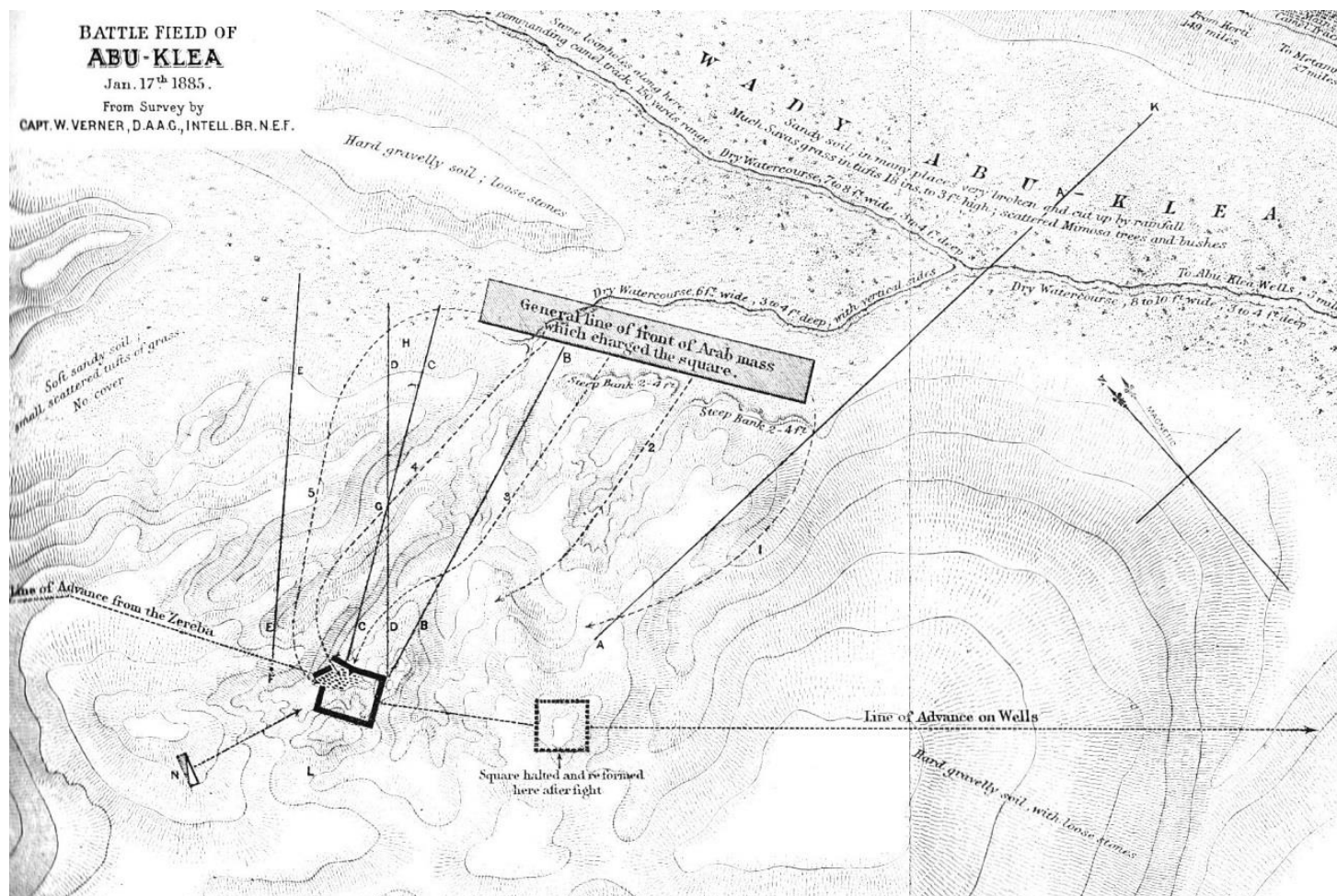
7.2 THE BATTLE OF ABU KLEA

On the morning of 17 January, Stewart was obliged to fight his way to water. The British advanced down the valley in a fighting square which did not exceed a frontage of 150 yards in either dimension. Into this tiny space were jammed the best part of 1,400 human souls and 150 quadrupeds. Incoming rifle fire was heavy and drove Stewart to order the deployment of skirmishers, a tactic which was both unconventional and unwise. Although the word ‘ambush’ is not conventionally used of

¹ See the account of Bordeini Bey; Wingate, *Mahdiism*, 163-172.



Illustration 4: Abu Klea Battlefield.
[Image Source: Fieldwork Phase, 2009.]



Map 6: Battle of Abu Klea
[Image Source: Macdonald's *Too Late for Gordon and Khartoum*.]

Abu Klea, Mūsā wad Ḥilū drew the British down the valley until they were within 450 yards of 5,000 carefully concealed Kordofanis. The British skirmishers were obliged to run back to the sanctuary of the square, but in doing so prevented the left face companies from developing their fire in the approved fashion. To make matters worse, the heavy cavalrymen of HCR were being required to fight as infantrymen. All but untrained for such an unaccustomed role, they had no real grasp of the golden-rules of fighting in square. These were primarily to do with the vital importance of tactical cohesion and necessarily demanded resolve, steadiness and a high standard of battlefield discipline.

When the crunch came, the Royal Dragoons detachment unaccountably ran out to the threatened flank,¹ instead of hastening to close up on their former position in the rear face, while Colonel Burnaby compounded the error by wheeling another half-company out of the rear face in conformity with the Royals.² With the enemy closing fast, Burnaby suddenly realised his mistake and ordered the two errant detachments to wheel back into their proper positions. From right to left the threatened left face consisted C and D Companies MICR and No. 5 Company HCR, the latter consisting of detachments from the 5th and 16th Lancers. When the fleeing skirmishers cleared their arcs, the mounted infantry companies each loosed a hard-hitting volley.³ No. 5 Company, however, was hindered by the skirmishers for longer and also had a hollow to its front, into which the charging Kordofanis had momentarily disappeared.⁴ When at last the lancers did open fire, they also began stepping backwards,⁵ which in terms of the 'infantry drill' was to be deplored.

Conventionally historians have suggested that the anṣār had been quick to spot the disarray at the left rear of the square and veered towards the gap. The notion originates with a passage in Wilson's account of the battle which does indeed describe a veering effect;⁶ but this is then erroneously conjoined with the established facts that the rear face was in disarray and that heavy hand-to-hand fighting subsequently occurred at the left rear corner. However, fieldwork established that a gap in the rear face would not have been visible to men attacking uphill against the left face. Additionally the successful execution of so dramatic a manoeuvre would have required near-suicidal resolution to run past 180 rifle barrels at point-blank range. Reconciliation of the known array of participant accounts would suggest that the square was actually penetrated at two points, by two distinctly separate anṣār formations. The movement described by Wilson took place when the anṣār charging the MICR companies instinctively shied away from their initial company volleys. These we know from Burleigh's account were fired at about 150 yards and brought down literally scores of men. The effect was that the anṣār in front of C and D Companies swung across a much shorter distance than is conventionally portrayed, to charge home against No. 5 Company.⁷ The square was likewise penetrated at the left rear

¹ Trafford MS.

² Whitaker (ed.), Verner Diary, 45.

³ Burleigh, quoted in *The English in Egypt*, 424; see also Whitaker (ed.), Verner Diary, 42.

⁴ Fieldwork, see Illustrations 5 and 6.

⁵ Whitaker (ed.), Verner Diary, 42; Wilson, *Korti to Khartum*, 34.

⁶ Ibid, 28-9.

⁷ Whitaker (ed.), Verner Diary, 42-3.

corner, not by the men described by Wilson but by a separate wave of anṣār who emerged from a covered approach just to the left rear of the square.¹ In fact the key to this construct has been hiding in plain view, so to speak, ever since Verner's map of the battle was incorporated into Macdonald's book. The book itself is rare, however, which perhaps accounts for why the point has so often been missed by historians. Verner's map is reproduced here as Map 6 and the manoeuvres at issue are traced by his lines 3 and 5 (there were five anṣār formations). When Verner's map is married up, not with Wilson's text or Macdonald's text, but rather with Verner's diary,² everything becomes clear – including the true context of the passage in Wilson's book.

The ensuing hand-to-hand fighting lasted less than 10 minutes but was savage in the extreme. It will suffice to say that although the left rear corner of their formation crumpled, the embattled British killed every anṣāri who broke in, albeit at a heavy price, which included the death of Fred Burnaby. The officially stated loss was 9 officers & 65 NCOs and men killed, and 9 officers & 85 NCOs and men wounded. The total Mahdīst loss across the battle as a whole might conceivably have been as high as 1,600.³ While the circumstances of Mūsā wad Ḥilū's death are not known for sure, the strongest likelihood is that he was the 'fine old sheikh' referred to in *From Korti to Khartum* simply as 'Musa' (a very common name), who Wilson describes as being shot down in the centre of the square.⁴ The defeated host, which had commenced the fight with a strength of around 10-12,000 men, fell back towards Metemmeh, though certainly some of the Berber contingent went north with their wounded. It was almost dark by the time the hussars finally located the wells, a series of shallow depressions containing no great quantity of water. It was unfortunate that the night was bitterly cold and that nobody had thought to pack blankets for the wounded. Some officers judged that it was the coldest night of the campaign,⁵ but the combined effects of fatigue, hunger, dehydration and shock, combined with the absence of greatcoats and blankets, probably made the night seem more relentlessly cold than would otherwise have been the case. At first light the following morning, the administrative echelon and its guard force loaded the baggage-camels and moved down the valley to marry up with the main body at around 8.00 am.⁶

Abu Klea is rightly remembered as a triumph of the ordinary British soldier in adversity, but is unlikely to have gone quite so badly wrong had it not been for the 'novel expedient' of requiring cavalymen to fight as infantrymen without the advantage of any training for role.⁷ When, four days later, Wolseley received Stewart's

¹ Illustrations 5 & 6 label this feature as the 'disruptive branch' of the main *khōr* because in crossing it, in the last few minutes before the Kordofani charge, the square had fallen into a certain amount of disarray.

² Verner was standing behind No. 5 Company, with a grandstand view. He was knocked down in the immediate break-in and left for dead as the anṣār surged into the square.

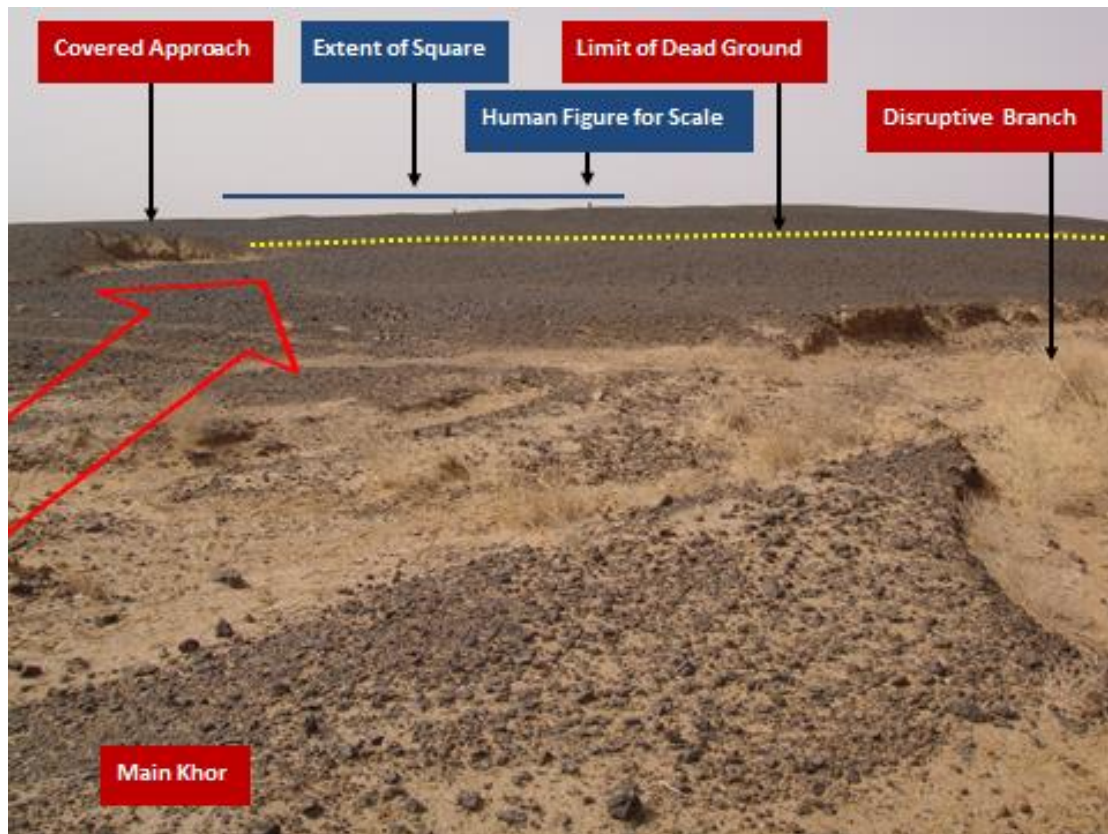
³ Verner was tasked by Wilson to estimate the enemy loss and returned a figure of 1,100 bodies within a 500 yard circumference of the square.

⁴ Wilson, *Korti to Khartum*, 28-9.

⁵ Beresford, *Memoirs*, ii, 270.... 'it was the coldest night in my remembrance.' Dawson, *Stewart's Desert March*, 731... 'the coldest night I ever felt.'

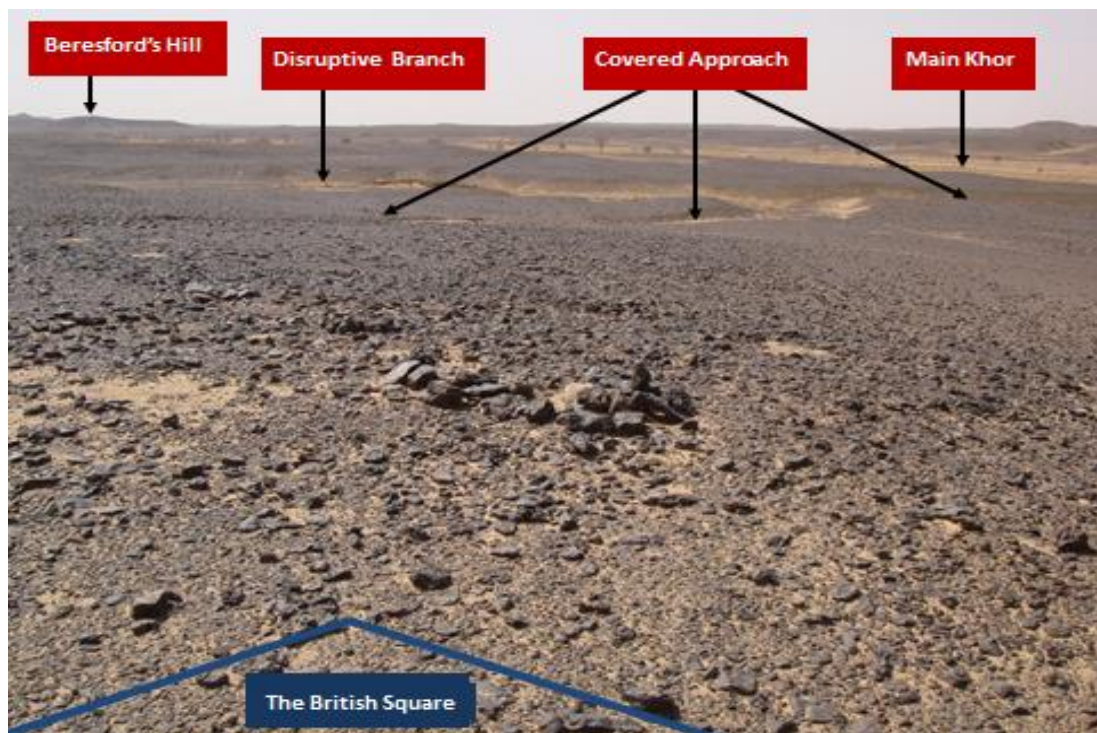
⁶ War-diary entry 18 Jan. 85.

⁷ See Dundonald, *My Army Life*, 28, where the then Lord Cochrane's account mentions the crass attitude of some of his colleagues to learning the 'infantry drill'.



Illustrations 5 & 6: The Kordofani charge.

The top photograph shows how the square, in moving from right to left, was first disrupted by and then menaced from a covered approach. Below the same ground is portrayed from a British perspective. [Image Source: Fieldwork Phase, 2009.]



official despatch, he observed in his journal:

Our loss has been heavy arising from the unsteadiness of the Heavy Camel Regt. which allowed the enemy to break into the square....I am very sorry about this Heavy Camel Regt. The men and officers were magnificent, but not being drilled as Infantry, they did not have their confidence in their rifles that an Infantry Regt. would have had. It is a dangerous experiment, using cavalry as foot soldiers under such a trial, but being picked men they ought to have done better.¹

Not untypically oblivious to his fallibility, Wolseley wrote as if the cavalry-based camel regiments had been conceived by somebody else. He was at his most acerbic when he mused, 'How delighted the Prince of Wales & the Duke of Cambridge will be that poor Burnaby is killed. His high military spirit, energy, zeal and remarkable personal courage were not sufficient in the eyes of those Royal tailors to cover up the fact that socially Burnaby was distasteful to them and their set.' Ironically Wolseley observed of Stewart that, 'he and his staff were for some minutes in great danger: I believe they were knocked down in melee and Stewart had his horse killed. His loss would have been irreparable, and I dread to think of his being killed in some of these early affairs.' Little did he know, as he wrote these words, that his worst fears had already come to pass; that these were not 'early affairs', but the high-water mark of his campaign.

7.3 BETWEEN BATTLES – 18 JANUARY

7.3.1 Intelligence, Decisions and Doubt

In the immediate aftermath of the battle, Stewart had been so shaken by the heavy British loss that he contemplated a long halt to wait for reinforcements.² His decision to push on regardless seems to have originated with a crucial piece of intelligence briefed to him by Sir Charles Wilson during the course of the morning. Four black Africans had surrendered at the zariba and were questioned by the intelligence officers during the course of the morning. It transpired that they were survivors of the Hicks expedition, subsequently pressganged into rebel service. Their leader was a garrulous Italian-speaking sergeant whose language skills were attributable to time spent as a waiter in a Naples hotel.³ One potentially vital piece of information imparted by the sergeant was to the effect that the Kordofani contingent was only the advanced guard of a much stronger army, which was even now marching north from Khartoum. It appears to have been a sincerely proffered statement, although it also happens not to have been true, albeit Nūr 'Anqara was drawing nigh with about 2,000 reinforcements.

Regardless of its questionable reliability, the information nonetheless exerted a profound effect on Stewart's thinking. He determined to press on with all possible speed, with the idea of establishing himself on the Nile before the new Mahdīst force

¹ Wolseley, journal entry 21 Jan. 85; see Preston (ed.), *Relief of Gordon*, 121-2.

² Wilson, *From Korti to Khartum*, 37f.

³ Ibid, 42.

could come up. As he sat writing his despatches, he set his heart on making a long night-march, commencing at 2.00 that afternoon. As there was a great deal of reorganization to be done before the column would be fit to move anywhere, this sort of timetable would leave precious little time for the troops to enjoy so much as a catnap.

7.3.2 Orders and Intent

At about 1.00 *pm* Stewart called in the commanding officers.¹ The intelligence concerning the imminent arrival of a second enemy host caused a certain amount of consternation. Macdonald was within earshot at the time and describes how one of the commanding officers, 'on the ground of this rumour advised him to fall back on Jakdul and wait for reinforcements. The only notice of this suggestion taken by our lion-hearted general was a contemptuous stare at the man who ventured to make it.'² There was more widespread opposition to the idea of a night-march. According to Macdonald:

*Several of the commanding officers had strongly advised General Stewart to postpone marching until early next morning, in order that the men might have a rest after their two sleepless nights and the excitement of the battle on the previous day. He resolved, however, to push on in order not to give the enemy time to recover from the effects of their recent defeat.*³

Stewart heard the colonels out and then, as was his perfect right, discarded their advice. As can often be the way with overruled cabals of colonels, the regimental commanders were probably, on balance, in the right. Apart from the necessity to give their exhausted soldiers a decent night's rest, there was a second even more compelling reason to wait for morning. There may have been as many as 50 waterholes⁴ sunk into the gravel, but they were all shallow and of limited capacity. By the time they had satiated the needs of Barrow's ponies and all the human souls, there was insufficient water remaining to go around 2,500 dehydrated camels. The wells would gradually refill by percolation, but this was certain to take time and Stewart's decision was that he could not afford to wait. As logistic decisions go, this was about as big as they come. By failing to water his animals the general had started a stop-clock running on the attainment of his immediate mission.

The advance across the Bayūda had now reached the point where the operative sentence in Stewart's orders was, 'You will then advance on Metemmeh, which you will attack and occupy. For this it may be advisable to laager your convoy at the wells of Shebakat [sic].' Although he had expressed himself sufficiently loosely to allow of a certain amount of latitude, Wolseley could evidently foresee the necessity to have a ready supply of water available prior to commencing operations against

¹ Whitaker (ed.), *Verner Diary*, 47.

² Macdonald, *Too Late*, 255. There are no clues in the sources as to which of the colonels this was.

³ *Ibid*, 256.

⁴ Burleigh, quoted in *The English in Egypt*, 427.

Metemmeh. But Stewart no longer intended halting at Shebacat, where the water supply might be dubious and the enemy might be waiting, but instead would strike out on a right oblique designed to bring him directly to the west bank of the Nile. Of all the wells along the axis thus far, only Jakdul had contained ample water. There was every possibility that Shebacat might also disappoint and leave him short of water in close proximity to the enemy. The strike for the Nile would obviate any such risk. Stewart's overriding concern, though, was to avoid a second general action by utilising the hours of darkness to achieve surprise. He would do this by keeping out of sight of Metemmeh and gaining the Nile about three miles upstream of the town. He would then be able to establish a strong defensive position, with an infinite supply of water at his back, prior to undertaking further offensive operations. In *From Korti to Khartum* Wilson states that Stewart's intention was to breakfast on the river and attack Metemmeh later the same morning.¹ If it could be relied upon to go well, there was considerable merit in the scheme. Certainly current British doctrine would have it that, 'Opportunistic exploitation allows unforeseen tactical advantages [such as a recent victory] to be turned into operational or even campaign success.'²

The problem lay in the plan's inflexibility, for only rarely do operations of war work themselves through precisely as conceived. Insert a night-march into any operation and the potential for things to go awry increases exponentially. If Stewart marched on without watering his camels for a fifth successive day, he was necessarily committing himself to reaching the river by sunset on Monday. Also bearing down on the tactical conundrum was the apparently imminent arrival of the second Mahdīst force. In the lecture notes he prepared at some point in the 1890s Verner wrote, 'Another piece of news of serious import to us was that the Mahdi had sent a second contingent to bar our road to the river which still lay 24 miles ahead of us. Sir Herbert at once decided to push on at all risks and thus gain the river before this new force could oppose us.'³ In essence, Stewart wanted to be established on the Nile before having to fight a second time, although in assessing his decision-making we should bear in mind that there was no intelligence to suggest where the second Mahdīst army actually was. It might, for all he knew, already be at Metemmeh. While the boldness of Stewart's plan was commendable, he appears not to have grasped the implications of failing to reach the river under the cover of darkness. If the night-march fell even a few miles short, he was certain to find himself light on options: by failing to water his camels he would be leaving himself with no alternative but to fight his way to the Nile by Monday evening, come what may. Once the column was in sight of Metemmeh, with more than 20 miles of waterless desert to its rear and the camels on their last legs, any form of delay would quickly become intolerable. Similarly retreat would be impossible, without killing hundreds of irreplaceable camels to the wider prejudice of the campaign plan.

If the night-march was to proceed and there was a fight short of the river, it was now certain that it would be fought in daylight on the 19th by troops who had last enjoyed a proper night's sleep on the night 15/16 January. If it turned out to be

¹ Wilson, *Korti to Khartum*, 46-7.

² ADP *Operations*, Ch. 7, para. 0721, p. 7-13.

³ Whitaker (ed.), Verner Diary, lecture notes, pp. xx-xxi.

anything other than a swift and decisive victory, the baggage-train would be all but destroyed for want of water and there would be no stockpile of stores at Metemmeh with which to sustain the final approach to Khartoum. Such was the dramatic nature of Stewart's gamble. The alternative was to delay by about 14 hours, march on Metemmeh in daylight and arrive in good order; with refreshed troops, high morale, camels fit to endure another four or five days in the desert and an infinitely greater array of tactical options still open. The downside to this otherwise attractive course of action was that it entailed a strong likelihood of a second general action short of Metemmeh. The regimental commanders were not the only doubters; John Cameron of the *Standard* was also gravely worried. During the early afternoon he approached Beresford and enquired, 'Lord Charles, have you any influence with General Stewart? If so for God's sake implore him not to go on without reinforcements. I know these people and he does not.' Beresford was generous enough to observe that Cameron, 'was not alarmed for his own safety, for he was a most gallant man; but he feared for the column.'¹ Beresford does not go on to say whether or not he made any such approach to Stewart.

Airlie's war-diary notes that the garrison left to secure the wells and the wounded consisted of 100 members of 1st Royal Sussex, under Major Harden. In fact it was the same B and F Company combination (theoretically 4 & 125) which had earlier defended the zariba, under Majors Harden and Gern respectively, with the latter not the former in overall command.² In the meantime 2.00 *pm* had come and gone. The difficulty in filling great numbers of water-skins from depleted wells compelled a temporary postponement of departure. The general's couriers, a party of five camel-mounted *bāshi-būzuqs*, who had been given more than £100 in coin to race across the 149 miles separating Stewart from Wolseley, departed not long after two o'clock. They would not reach Korti until Wednesday 21 January.³

Wilson now made a final attempt to dissuade Stewart from a night-march:

*I had always been dubious about the advisability of these night-marches, and before starting spoke to Stewart about this one, and pointed out that the men had had no sleep for two nights. He was, however, very sanguine; said that the men were in capital spirits, and that as it was only a matter of 25 miles, we should be at the Nile long before daybreak, and in time for the men to have a good rest before fighting.*⁴

This was a bold assessment on Stewart's part. It is hard to think of an example of a cross-country night-march, pre-dating the age of mechanisation, which succeeded in gaining anything like 25 miles. And yet the staff calculations, as is so often the case in such situations, seemed in advance to add up. According to Lord Cochrane, who was

¹ Beresford, *Memoirs*, ii, 271.

² Hart's *AL* 1885, (i, 279), shows that Gern's majority was dated Nov. 83, and Harden's Aug. 84. That Airlie was in error is confirmed by Trafford's diary and Burleigh's *Daily Telegraph* report of 24 Jan.

³ Wolseley to his wife, 20 Jan. 85, (not despatched until 26 Jan); see Arthur (ed.), *Wolseley Letters*, 159-161.

⁴ Wilson, *Korti to Khartum*, 48.

acting as baggage-master, the baggage-train was capable of making 2.5 miles in the hour;¹ Metemmeh was a mathematically convenient 25 miles away, giving a theoretical transit time of 10 hours. Building in two one-hour halts would mean that the column, provided it departed promptly, ought to hit the river at 2.00 *am*, some four hours before sunrise.² But the Desert Column did not depart promptly. It marched, in the end, at 4.20 *pm*.³ Had it left on time it would have enjoyed about 4½ hours of daylight, an itinerary which would have seen it no fewer than 11 miles closer to the river by the time the light failed. Instead, the delay left Stewart only 2 hours and 10 minutes of daylight. The 4.20 *pm* departure suggested a theoretical arrival time at the river of 04.50 *am*, a mere 1 hour and 40 minutes before sunrise. It would have been a tight schedule, with barely any margin for error, under a clear sky and a full moon. Unfortunately the night 18/19 January would be illuminated only by faint starlight.⁴

7.4 OUTCOME AND CONSEQUENCES OF THE NIGHT-MARCH

There is little to be gained from a detailed account of the night march, versions of which are to be found in many of the participant sources;⁵ far more important are its consequences. Suffice it to say that the march proved every bit as difficult as Wilson had anticipated. His description of the disarray which occurred in the Shebacat bush is typical of the wider source coverage:

*The column got into terrible disorder here. The mounted portion got through fairly enough, but the baggage-camels got jammed and entangled in the bush; many were left behind, others were extricated with difficulty. The confusion was endless, and the noise of swearing men and 'grousing' camels could have been heard miles away. The passage through the bush would have been troublesome enough in daylight for a convoy as large as ours; at night, with no moon, it was exceedingly difficult. Halts were frequent, and for a long time we made little progress.*⁶

Many baggage-camels gave up the ghost during the course of the night and had to be abandoned. With the native drivers sleeping fitfully atop their own camels, a still greater quantity of baggage-animals, driven by instinct to somehow satiate their thirst and hunger, wandered off into the dark with their precious loads. The overall loss appears to have been considerable. Macdonald noted that 'some said' afterwards that it had been, 'a hundred at least.'⁷ Sir Charles Wilson wrote, 'No one will ever know the

¹ Dundonald, *My Army Life*, 42-3.

² It is Cochrane who gives sunrise as 06.30 *am*; Ibid, 43.

³ I have here preferred the time given by Airlie. A variety of times are to be found in the sources, but the War-diary is theoretically and probably actually the most authoritative. Wilson's official despatch for Abu Kru gives 3.30 *pm*; see Colville, OH, ii, 261. Verner (Diary, 47) gives 4.10 *pm*.

⁴ Colville, OH, ii, p 22.

⁵ e.g. Verner 1885, Wilson 1886, Dawson 1888, Beresford 1914, Dundonald 1926, Marling 1931,

⁶ Wilson, *Korti to Khartum*, 50-1.

⁷ Macdonald, *Too Late*, 261.

number of camels lost during the march, but it is supposed that over 100 disappeared with their loads.¹ If this estimate was broadly accurate, then the night-march cost the Desert Column a remarkable 10% of its commissariat stores. When at length the head of the column broke free of the Shebacat bush, to gain relatively open ground, the guide Ali Loda advised Wilson and Verner that there was now a straight run into Metemmeh ahead. There would inevitably be a long halt while the rest of the force cleared the thick cover and closed up on the head of the column. It was about 1.00 *am* when Verner reported to Wilson that in his judgement they had come 15 miles. Aware that the GOC intended to leave the caravan road and push into the open desert on a right oblique, Verner represented to his chief, 'the difficulties likely to arise from such a proceeding.'² Wilson in turn went to speak with Stewart:

I was in favour of going along the road to within two or three miles of Matammeh [sic], and then halting to let the men have a good rest before daylight, after which we could attack the town; and I pointed out that the men and animals were very tired, and that a long halt on the right road would enable the transport-animals to close up and stragglers to come in. Stewart was, however, determined to go on and get to the river without fighting. He was quite opposed to the idea of fighting before reaching the Nile, and thought that we would be in a much better position if we fought with our backs to the river and made sure of water.³

Verner and Ali Loda were summoned to join the conversation. Ali Loda appeared certain that the worst of the thorn-bush lay behind them. Importantly, from the general's point of view, he was adamant that he could lead the column to the river, without passing in sight of Metemmeh.

Although this was a critical decision-point, nobody seems to have taken the trouble to do the time and space calculations necessary to support rational decision-making. If Verner's estimate of distance was correct, and Stewart had nothing better to go on, the column had taken 8 hours 40 minutes to cover 15 miles. This equates to 34 minutes per mile, safely slower than 2 *mph*. With another ten miles to go, it could not possibly reach the river for another 5 hours 40 minutes. If Stewart could make an immediate start, maintain the same rate of advance, (regardless of worsening fatigue), take no further halts, check-navigate on the move and steer a perfect course from beginning to end, his command would arrive at the river at 6.40 *am*. Of course night operations rarely play themselves through that way. If the column forged ahead, its advance was now certain to be compromised some miles short of the river, and if that happened there was likely to be a stiff fight at the edge of the Bayūda. The options had now resolved themselves into push on, fail to reach the river and be forced fight a battle with exhausted troops; or alternatively, halt while the column was still 10 miles from the enemy, utilise the remaining five hours of darkness to sleep and feed, and fight not long after midday at the head of reinvigorated troops. Being able to water the

¹ Wilson, *Korti to Khartum*, 60.

² Whitaker (ed.), *Verner Diary*, 48.

³ Wilson, *Korti to Khartum*, 52.

camels and rest the troops beside the Nile was an attractive notion, but at 1.00 *am* on the morning of 19 January 1885 could no longer be logically regarded as realistic. Unfortunately, Stewart chose to place his faith not in the rationality of time and space calculations, but in that eternal agent of military disaster, wishful thinking. The march continued.

At about 5.30 *am*, with the first signs of dawn appearing in the east, the GOC again brought the column to a halt and held a lengthy consultation with the knot of officers leading the way. Stewart and Wilson both thought that the column should now be within striking distance of the Nile and were disappointed to find Ali Loda talking as if it were still some way off. Wilson wrote that, 'we began to think he was taking us too far away from Matammah [sic], as Stewart did not want to strike the river more than three miles above the town.'¹ Verner's diary would suggest, however, that the column had made as little as four miles in the preceding 4¼ hours.² If his estimate was correct, then the British were still around six miles shy of the river at this juncture. Here, then, was another key decision-point. It was still not too late to draw a line under the night-march and rest the troops at a safe distance from the enemy, but wishful thinking once again triumphed over logic. Verner described the outcome of the consultation:

*It was generally decided that the course I had taken was far too much to the westward and would bring us to the river many miles above Metemmeh. Eventually the general ordered the column to move in a direction which may be described as south-easterly. I told him that I was firmly convinced that this course would take us right on top of Metemmeh. The general, however, said he wished to go the nearest point of the Nile, and Ali Loda was given, through the general's interpreter, fresh orders to conduct the column there.*³

The change of direction imposed by Stewart served to swing the column off its right oblique, onto a slight left oblique. Verner remained convinced that the new bearing would bring them directly to Metemmeh in precisely the manner the general wished to avoid. 'From this time,' he wrote, 'I did not consider that Ali Loda had a fair chance; as he still tried to work off to the west, he was more or less compelled to follow the cavalry party who escorted him.'⁴ After making about two more miles, Stewart finally accepted that the Nile was nothing like as close as he had imagined and again called a halt. Verner asked if he could take a party of hussars to scout over the next few rises and was duly assigned a 5-man escort.⁵

Having pushed about two miles ahead of the main body, Verner rode onto a low knoll from which he gained an expansive view into the Nile Valley. He was at no great elevation, however, so that the slightest obstruction to his line of sight made it difficult to tell what might lay beyond. The familiar sound of throbbing *noggara* told him at once that the enemy were aware of the near-approach of the British. The

¹ Ibid, 55.

² Whitaker (ed.), Verner Diary, 49.

³ Ibid, 49-50.

⁴ Ibid, 50.

⁵ Capt. W. W. C. Verner, *Sketches in the Soudan*, (London, 1885).

course of the river was marked by the usual belt of green, although the lie of the land was such that it was more readily discernible in some stretches than others. Beyond the river lay an irregular line of whale-backed hills. In front was an almost dead flat plain of about 3½ miles in width, bounded at its southern extremity by a low, flat-topped gravel ridge which served to separate the Bayūda from the cultivated flood-plain astride the Nile. The ridge was anything up to seven miles in length and generally about three-quarters of a mile wide.¹ There was a string of mud-built settlements along the stretch of ridge lying just west of Metemmeh. Scanning the landscape for the source of the distant drumming, Verner spotted two substantial *anṣār* formations in front of the town.² There were also parties of horsemen galloping about between the villages atop the ridge.

In the interim the main body had been plodding forward. At about 6.40 *am* the general and his entourage rode onto a rise to take in the view.³ While the course of the Nile was easily identifiable away to the far right, the low elevation of the vantage point made it difficult to tell what line they ought to take if they were to reach the river by the shortest possible route, or quite how long it would take to get there. Large crowds of *anṣār* were now pouring out of Metemmeh and moving west along the gravel ridge. 'After all,' observed Stewart, 'we shall have to fight our way to the Nile. We ought to have been here two hours ago, and should have been but for those unfortunate camels.' The more awkward truth was that Stewart had gambled against long odds and lost. At 7.00 *am* Verner and his escort came in. His report made it clear that there was no prospect of getting to water without fighting for it. Stewart asked whether he had identified any commanding positions *en route* to the river and, on being told of the high point from which he had been observing Metemmeh, directed him to lead the column towards it. Wilson asked the general what he intended to do and was told in reply that, 'he was going to close up the transport, and then march for the river, with his fighting men on the left between the transport and Matammah [sic].'⁴ Barrow was then instructed to push the 19th Hussars out to protect the left, while the camel regiments and baggage-train resumed the march. Wilson decided to accompany the cavalry and did not play a role in any of Stewart's subsequent decision-making. The course now set by Verner was a pronounced right oblique.

At around 7.45 *am* Stewart made the first major modification to his plan. The sound of musketry indicated that Barrow's cavalry was skirmishing to the left flank. The head of the column was still half a mile short of Verner's high point, when enemy riflemen opened a 'smart fire' fire from the British left.⁵ The fusillade served to notify Stewart that the *anṣār* had no intention of limply waiting at Metemmeh to be attacked. If the enemy were all over the plain, attempting to push the baggage-train through to the river would be fraught with danger. To Stewart's mind there was nothing aboard the animals which the fighting troops could not afford to forego for a few more hours. His immediate solution was to leave the administrative echelon in a

¹ The ground description is derived from the fieldwork phase.

² Whitaker (ed.), Verner Diary, 50.

³ Macdonald, *Too Late*, 264-5.

⁴ Wilson, *Korti to Khartum*, 57-8.

⁵ Whitaker (ed.), Verner Diary, lecture notes, p. xxii.

defended position and push ahead with the fighting echelon only. A low round-topped knoll just to the right of the line of march caught the general's eye, obviating any need to reach the high point earlier commended by Verner. Melton Prior heard him announce to the staff, 'This position will do for me.'¹ As the column came to a halt, a staff officer galloped away to tell Lord Cochrane that he was required by the general:

*When I came, he said, "I am taking the column straight on to the Nile, but am leaving the transport here under you," pointing to a spot some 250 yards to the right; 'I will send you the company of the Sussex Regiment, and with the regimental baggage-guards you will be able to hold your own.'*²

Once the native drivers had moved their animals onto the knoll, Cochrane had his men start dropping them onto their haunches in a hollow square, each face of which was to consist of several parallel lines of animals. All the animals' head-ropes were then tied to the saddle in front, so as to create an improvised entanglement.

It was now that an important intervention described in Macdonald's book took place. Quite what was said in the detail is not clear, but it appears to have been Airlie who did much of the talking. After spending some little while watching the enemy through their binoculars, the brigade-major and other unnamed members of the staff concluded that the general's plan was no longer tenable. The advice they now placed before their chief probably centred on three key points. First, there was the physical condition of the troops to consider: their chronic fatigue aside, they had last eaten at around midday the previous day. If they were now to be exposed to the same violent physical exertion as at Abu Klea, it was imperative that they be allowed to fortify themselves with a decent meal first. Second, it would be prudent in the face of such a strong and determined foe to give battle in square, not merely to attempt to brush the enemy aside. The third and decisive factor was that the *anṣār* were already deployed in strength directly across the axis. This meant that fending off the enemy on the left flank alone would no longer suffice. After a moment's thought Stewart nodded towards the baggage-train and announced, 'I will occupy that position. I intend attacking the enemy as soon as the men get something to eat.' The low knoll was only ever intended as a temporary position but looked, even to a mortified Macdonald, who had no professional expertise to draw upon, 'like an uncanny and dangerous place to halt in under the circumstances.' 'For any sake', Macdonald interjected, 'do not halt the column here, but defend your left flank and boldly advance.' He wrote later that, 'I received no reply to my impulsive appeal, excepting an anxious look.'³ The staff were already on their way to tell the colonels to move their units onto the knoll and take up defensive positions.

¹ Prior, *Campaigns*, 218.

² Dundonald, *My Army Life*, 46. If Gleichen's temporary command of the previous night provides a standard model, there would have been three regimental baggage guards each of 8 men, to add to the 2 officers and 50 men of Trafford's C Coy, 1st Royal Sussex. The 26 Field Coy detachment and the commissariat & transport staff would also have been left behind.

³ Macdonald, *Too Late*, 265-7.

Which of the two courses of action, halt, fortify and eat, or fight straight through to the river, was the correct one in the circumstances? On the one hand, there was a strong possibility that any attempt to push through to the Nile with the ponderous baggage-train in tow would result in its wholesale destruction. On the other hand, a successful holding action would require more readily defensible ground than was presently on offer. The night-march had been a sound enough idea, but failing to draw it to a close before now, when for the past five hours at least it had been obvious that it could not possibly succeed, amounted to poor tactical judgment. And herein lies a key point; by 7.30 *am* Stewart had put himself in a position where all of his options were in some way unsatisfactory and might even presage disaster. Wilson for his part had been against the idea of a night-march from the beginning and in *From Korti to Khartoum* makes the telling point that Metemmeh might actually have been attacked earlier, if only the march had been terminated around Shebacat:

So ended the night-march, which I cannot think was necessary, for the days were not hot, and the men would have fought much better after a night's sleep and a good breakfast. Had we halted when the column came to grief in the bush, every one [sic] would have been fresh in the morning; we should have had our fight close outside Matammeh [sic], and been into it and on the Nile by mid-day. As it was, we were in laager, with camels and horses that could scarcely walk, and men who had been marching all night, and who had had no rest for three consecutive nights. Men under such circumstances get into a nervous 'jumpy' state, which might lead to a grave disaster.¹

Around 600 Remington-armed anṣār were already approaching through the scrub, intent on bringing the British position under fire.² By now it was probably something around 8.15-8.30 *am*.

7.5 THE BATTLE OF ABU KRU

The position in which Stewart terminated his march to the Nile was in no sense readily defensible. Instead it was nothing more than a low oval-shaped knoll covered with a veneer of sand and a scattering of rocks (see Illustration 7). Nothing much grew there, nor were there any hollows, boulders or any other form of cover. It stood only about 25 feet above the lie of the land and was perhaps 300 yards in diameter. It nonetheless enjoyed an extensive view, both half-left towards Metemmeh and straight ahead towards the gravel ridge shrouding the flood-plain. The fields of fire took in a stretch of flat desert dotted with mimosa and occasional swathes of long grass – cover fit to provide the enemy with any number of well concealed fire-positions. The view to the right of the axis was clear for the first 60 degrees but was then obstructed by a low spur of perhaps 200 yards in length, which originated behind the knoll and arced round

¹ Wilson, *Korti to Khartum*, 58-9. Notwithstanding the strong case he makes against marching through the early hours of the morning, the contention that Metemmeh might have been taken by midday is probably overly optimistic.

² Beresford's official report dated 10 Mar. 85, see the *London Gazette*, 28 Apr. 85.

in front of it. It was so insignificant a feature that Burleigh remembered it as, 'a little double-crested pebbly mound.'¹ Because the highest point on the spur was marginally higher than the crest of the knoll, there was a great deal of dead-ground to the British right. The two features were separated by a shallow re-entrant of about 70-80 yards in width. It soon became obvious that the spur could not be left unoccupied.

The fighting regiments moved back towards the knoll, where they dismounted and knee-halted their riding-camels around the outer edge of the transport-animals already *in situ*. Shortage of space meant that hundreds of camels ended up in the low ground at the foot of the knoll. The troops were then allocated regimental and company arcs. Starting in the north, at the rear of the position, and moving clockwise around the perimeter, Stewart deployed his command in the order 19th Hussars, Royal Engineers, Naval Brigade, MICR, GCR, HCR, Royal Sussex.² Hence the camel regiments found themselves at the front of the position with MICR on the left, facing south-east, GCR in the centre, facing due south, and HCR on the right, facing south-west. Beresford and the Naval Brigade were at the left-rear, where they emplaced the Gardner to cover the open flank. The three screw-guns were deployed to the left-front of the position with arcs facing the river.³ With many long-range shots dropping onto the knoll, Stewart ordered that the baggage and saddles be unloaded and arrayed around the transport-animals as a breastwork. Most of the riding-camels would have to be left outside the perimeter, where they could be covered by fire and serve as an impromptu obstacle. The elevation and convex slope of the knoll meant that the animals inside the defences would be more exposed to fire than the ones left outside in the low ground. Cochrane's baggage-camels were so densely jammed together that the troops found it difficult to move around amongst them: lugging heavy commissariat boxes about made the proposition doubly difficult. In consequence the work of erecting the defences was labour-intensive, time-consuming and ruled out any possibility of quickly transitioning to the offensive. In the event, the miscellany of improvised defence-stores stretched far enough to create a perimeter wall of about 2½ feet in height.⁴ In the meantime, a small detachment of HCR had been sent out to occupy the high point on the spur, where they had come into action almost immediately.⁵ It was not long before Stewart's command was hemmed in. 'Gradually the enemy's skirmishers worked in force round our flanks,' wrote Verner, '*i.e.* along the eastward side first and then along the westward, and before long the circle was completed and every available bit of scrub or grass was tenanted by riflemen.'⁶ Soon the position had been all but invested, not only by riflemen, but also by significant bodies of horse and foot which had picked their way through the scrub to occupy nearby positions of advantage.⁷ By now the firefight had become general and British casualties were

¹ Burleigh, *Daily Telegraph* report dated 24 Jan. 85, quoted in the *Leeds Mercury*, 6 Mar. 85.

² Wilson, *Korti to Khartum*, sketch-map, 62; also Colville, OH, ii, sketch-map, 24.

³ Burleigh, *Daily Telegraph* report dated 23 Jan. 85, quoted in the *Western Times*, 31 Jan. 85.

⁴ Beresford, *Memoirs*, ii, 273.

⁵ Macdonald, *Too Late*, 268; Burleigh, *Daily Telegraph* report dated 24 Jan. 85, quoted in the *Leeds Mercury*, 6 Mar. 85.

⁶ Whitaker (ed.), *Verner Diary*, 51.

⁷ Burleigh, *Daily Telegraph* report dated 24 Jan. 85.



Illustration 7: Zariba Position at Abu Kru

[Image Source: Fieldwork Phase, 2009.]

beginning to mount.

At around 10.15 *am* Stewart was moving around the perimeter in company with Frank Rhodes.¹ Having talked briefly with Burleigh, he paused to survey the battlefield. Frederic Villiers was nearby and recounts that the general stepped onto a box to gain a better view. He was immediately shot in the groin. Rhodes and Villiers shouted for a surgeon and rushed to the general's assistance.² Though conscious and still in control of his faculties, he was badly hurt and was carried away with as little fuss as possible. Wilson suddenly found himself elevated to the command of a brigade, which was already embroiled in a tactically precarious situation.

7.5.1 Wilson's Battle

Chapter 4 established that a number of hostile accusations were later made pertaining to Wilson's time in command. If the purportedly unnecessary delay in setting off with the steamers was much to the fore, it is also the case that there was harsh criticism of his performance as a battlefield commander. This included the assertion that he now procrastinated about what was to be done; which is to say that there was an unaccountable delay between the fall of Stewart and the fighting echelon sallying forth to fight its way to the Nile. Importantly this was an interval in which a great many men were shot, so that the connection between the alleged failure of leadership and needless fatalities is very immediate. Marling would note in his journal, and later repeat in *Rifleman and Hussar*, an observation to the effect that, 'Sir Charles Wilson is rather an old woman who doesn't know anything about drill, and funks the responsibility, and Boscawen, though an awfully good chap personally, has not much experience.' He would also complain into his journal the following day that the column was being commanded by committee.³

The issue of command by committee is easily addressed, as Marling goes on to list its composition: '....Wilson, Boscawen, two Barrows, Charlie Beresford and David Airlie.' Put another way, this is actually a list, respectively, of the commander, the deputy commander (or senior commanding officer), three of the other four commanding officers and the brigade major. Thus, it is plainly *not* 'command by committee', but rather an easily identifiable group who together comprise the brigade commander's 'orders group' – the column's senior command team. Percy Barrow was CO 19th Hussars; his younger brother Charles was the acting CO of MICR, (Major

¹ Wilson, *Korti to Khartum*, 63. Macdonald on the other hand fixes the incident at some point between 8.30 and 9.00 *am* (*Too Late*, 268), but this seems far too early in the day to accommodate the activity which preceded the general's fall. Colvile differs only marginally from Wilson in placing the event at 10.00 *am*. Burleigh, however, differs markedly by placing the incident at 8.00 *am* (*Daily Telegraph*, 24 Jan. 85).

² According to Macdonald (*Too Late*, 268), Stewart was standing with Rhodes when he made up his mind to give 30-minutes' notice of his intention to advance. He instructed Rhodes to move in one direction advising officers as he went, while he himself set off in the opposite direction. Stewart had taken barely a dozen strides before he was shot in the groin. Macdonald, though, was not an eyewitness to the general's demise, whereas Villiers was. The latter's description has been preferred accordingly. Macdonald's version of Stewart's intent is not reflected by any other witness and is belied by the weight of countervailing evidence.

³ Marling, *Rifleman and Hussar*, 136-7.

Gough having been 'knocked senseless'¹ by a spent round at Abu Klea); while Beresford was not merely CO Naval Brigade, but also happened to be the senior officer with the force – senior even to Wilson who held his colonelcy by brevet. Airlie was the most junior member of the so-called committee, but held the primary staff appointment. The only name missing from Marling's list for it to be wholly synonymous with the 'orders group' was Talbot, CO HCR, who in the midst of a battle might have been absent for any number of legitimate reasons. Had some, all, or even just one of the lieutenant colonels serving as company officers in GCR appeared in Marling's list, there might be some validity in the notion of command by committee. Instead their names are conspicuous only by their absence. Marling's remark simply serves to confirm that Wilson exercised command in the approved fashion, which is to say through his orders group. It might also be taken to imply that Stewart had been noticeably less inclined to consult. But the general was a leading member of the Ring and, if he strove to emulate 'the chief', would have been a practitioner of the personal or 'great man' style of command, in which the GOC directly controlled and decided almost everything. There was a good reason too behind Wilson's later decision to entrust executive command of the square to CO GCR. It would be easy for the uninitiated to interpret Marling's mention of 'drill' as a reference to the parade-ground, whereas it must actually be understood as a reference to the 'infantry drill', the complex, formalised series of commands and formation changes designed to achieve tactical cohesion and unity of purpose in battle. Ignorance of the infantry drill was precisely why HCR had been exposed as the weakest link in the chain at Abu Klea. Because Wilson was a senior Royal Engineer it is in no sense surprising that he was not well versed in the infantry drill; it formed no part of his professional skill-base. Infantry officers like Boscawen and Marling, on the other hand, were required to learn it by rote.

There was another reason why it was perfectly proper for Wilson to assign executive command of the square to Boscawen, which has nothing whatever to do with, 'funking the responsibility'. Sir Charles was now the commander and it was not the GOC's place to exercise immediate command of fighting squares. Stewart had not been in executive command of the square at Abu Klea, but rather had delegated the task to Burnaby. Ironically it had been the latter's demonstrable weakness in the infantry drill which had contributed to the disarray at the left rear corner. Instead of criticising Wilson for handing over to a lieutenant colonel of Foot Guards, Marling would have been more justified in criticising Stewart for handing an infantry formation over to a Household Cavalry officer. Any general officer, even one who had been raised in the infantry and knew the drill inside out, Wolseley, Wood or Buller for example, would in the same situation as Wilson have delegated executive command of the square to a competent subordinate. The GOC's job was to decide how to win the battle, not to worry whether the right flank of B Company was properly aligned with A Company's left-hand file. When Marling's criticisms are subjected to cross-examination, they quickly wither away. It was Stewart who had cited Marling for the VC at Tamai. Reading between the lines it is apparent that he hero-worshipped the general. This is unlikely to have left him in a particularly receptive frame of mind, when

¹ Gleichen, *With the Camel Corps*, 124.

it came to grasping that the real reason why the column now found itself in such a dangerous predicament was everything to do with flawed judgement calls made by Stewart over the preceding 12 hours, and nothing whatever to do with Wilson, who had attempted to dissuade the general from proceeding as he had. Marling's accusations dispensed with, we can now turn to the question of procrastination.

7.5.2 Unaccountable Delay?

Wilson was only too acutely aware that he had precious little command experience to draw upon, so went at once to the next senior Army officer, Evelyn Boscawen, to talk the situation over. As they were duty bound to do, they decided to go to the hospital to ascertain what sort of condition the general was in. They found him lying on a stretcher in the shelter of some commissariat boxes, being 'very tenderly nursed' by Frank Rhodes and 'Sankey' Herbert. Wilson observed that Stewart was, 'very cool and collected, and apparently not in great pain.' When he attempted to console the general with remarks about a swift recovery, Stewart responded with words to the effect that, 'he was certain the wound was fatal and that his soldiering days were over.' 'I asked', wrote Wilson, 'what he had intended doing if he had not been hit. He said he thought the best thing to be done was to go straight at Matammah [sic] or to repeat the Abu Klea plan of going out to fight for the water, and then returning to the zeribah [sic] to carry the wounded, stores, etc, down to the Nile.'¹ Verner would place a very different interpretation on Stewart's mind-set, although careful cross-referencing of the source evidence would suggest that the relevant passage in his diary refers to a second, quite separate conversation between Stewart and Wilson, to which we will come in due course.

The combination of mounting casualties with what many officers and soldiers experienced as unfathomable inaction began to fray people's nerves. From their positions crouched low behind a camel-saddle or a biscuit-box, some of the younger officers not unnaturally inferred that the man in charge must be to blame. Looking back on the battle, their minds probably failed to register the fact that Stewart had kept them inactive under a heavy fire, for at least an hour and three quarters before he was shot. He fell at 10.15 *am*, while the square moved out at something just shy of 3.00 *pm*. If the intervening period can be shown to have been devoted to operationally vital preparations, or some other essential activity, then the charge of needless procrastination will not stand up to investigation. Verner's diary and Burleigh's *Daily Telegraph* report provide the key to the matter.

Verner had accompanied Wilson to the hospital, but was then sent to fetch Beresford. As he made his way past C Company MICR, he was intercepted by Captain 'Punch' Hardinge, who was keen to know what the latest headquarters' thinking was.² Verner replied that in his view the only viable course of action was to improve the defensibility of the position, by raising redoubts on the knoll and the spur, before then sending out a fighting square to cut its way through to the river. Hardinge approved and urged his friend to press this course on the senior officers. When Verner reached

¹ Wilson, *Korti to Khartum*, 64-5.

² Whitaker (ed.), *Verner Diary*, 52.

Beresford, he outlined his reading of the situation and was pleased to find that he concurred with everything put to him. Verner recounts that Beresford then went to confer with Wilson and Stewart. It is of note that Beresford makes no mention of participating in a council of war, in either his official report or his memoirs. In similar vein, Wilson gives no indication, in any of his official reports or his book, that his assumption of command was anything other than automatic. In his *Daily Telegraph* despatch of 24 January, however, Burleigh suggests that there was a formality to be gone through before anybody started issuing orders.

*When General Stewart was wounded the command of the column I understand by seniority devolved upon Lord Charles Beresford, but he being a naval officer and far from well, although personally standing by his Gardner gun all day, passed on the honour and it fell to Sir Charles Wilson. The latter officer held a council of war at which Colonels Boscawen, Barrow, Lord Charles Beresford and others were present.*¹

For Beresford, the question of command succession would have been straightforward. Wolseley had assigned him a very specific role and it would have been presumptuous of him to assume a far greater one, over the heads of his Army colleagues. His job was to take command of Gordon's steamers when they reached the Nile, not to command a brigade of soldiers. As chief of intelligence, Wilson was at the heart of things, understood Wolseley's intent and was Beresford's senior by appointment. Ceding the command to Wilson was a formality, albeit the protocols governing seniority demanded that it be gone through. That particular conversation dispensed with, Wilson would have announced to the lieutenant colonels that he was now formally assuming command and appointing Boscawen as his chief of staff. The knock-on effect of the arrangement was that command of GCR devolved upon its senior company commander, Lieutenant Colonel Mildmay Willson. Burleigh's *Daily Telegraph* report of five days later is the only source which specifically describes the most important part of the council of war – its outcome. 'It was resolved', he wrote, 'to wait until two p.m. the enemy's assault upon our position, and if by that time they did not assail it, to march out with a square of about 1,200 men which should fight its way on foot to the Nile.'² One element missing from Burleigh's remarks, but reflected by other sources, is that the order to fortify the knoll and the outlying spur came at around the same time that such a council of war would have broken up. It can thus reasonably be inferred to be part of the same plan. Crucially, then, if we can accept Burleigh as experienced, typically reliable and unlikely, as the *Daily Telegraph* correspondent, to have reported events which had no foundation in reality, there would appear to have been a collective and considered decision by the colonels not to take the offensive until 2.00 pm, in the belief, (mistaken as it transpired), that the enemy was building up to an attack. In the meantime, the force would strive to improve the defensibility of its position, by fortifying the knoll and the spur.

¹ Burleigh, *Daily Telegraph* report dated 24 Jan. 85, quoted in the *Leeds Mercury*, 6 Mar. 85.

² Ibid.

Verner's diary throws more useful light on the question of delay, by suggesting that the *hors de combat* Stewart continued to play a role in decision-making. As was earlier alluded to, the diary shows that a second conversation took place between Wilson and Stewart and establishes that it had a markedly different tone to the first. The extract below states that it occurred *after* the outlying redoubt had been completed, which is to say anything up to 3¾ hours after Stewart had been wounded, precluding any possibility of it being the same and only conversation described in Wilson's book.

The mound had meanwhile been roughly and rapidly fortified by the Engineers and a party of volunteers from the Guards. Mr. Burleigh, the Daily Telegraph correspondent, lent a hand. I went across to this point and found it rather a warm corner, the enemy being able to concentrate a considerable amount of fire on it. I then went back to the hospital and found Sir Charles kneeling beside Sir Herbert discussing the situation. From what I could gather the latter wished us to remain where we were until the enemy should summon courage to attack us and deliver a charge. There can be no doubt but that Sir Herbert justly feared the risk that a small square might be rushed by the enemy's overwhelming numbers and so preferred to keep the force together to repel an attack. As, however, he had been wounded tolerably early in the action, he was not a witness to the effect of the enemy's all round fire on our zeriba [sic] and to which we had now been exposed for some four hours.¹

In his later lecture notes, Verner reiterates the remarks in his diary. 'It was about now that Sir Herbert received his mortal wound and, believing that he could not live many hours, his only orders were for us *on no account to advance*, but to wait until the Dervishes should charge and then defeat them. Unfortunately this is exactly what they would not do...'.² The inference is that the 'sit tight' outcome of the council of war was primarily attributable to Stewart. It is likely that it was Sir Charles Wilson, or Wilson together with Boscawen and some combination of the other senior officers, who appended the 2.00 *pm* provision, once they were out of earshot of the general. It is evident that the 2 o'clock timing was not briefed downwards, as it would not otherwise be so difficult to detect in the sources. Indeed, if it had been widely known about, none of the carping criticisms subsequently perpetrated by Marling and others could have occurred.

Let us now turn to Charles Williams, the journalist shortly to become Wilson's worst enemy. In his *Daily Chronicle* coverage of the battle Williams remarks, 'Sir Charles Wilson was now in command, cool, collected, meeting each move of the enemy and noting weak points.'³ Here, then, is the starkest of discrepancies between Williams's 'live' reporting from the battlefield and the character assassination he would later resort to in his controversial article for the *Fortnightly Review*. By that time Khartoum had fallen, the steamer dash had run its course, Wilson had fallen out of

¹ Whitaker (ed.), Verner Diary, 52.

² Ibid, lecture notes, p. xxii.

³ Williams, *Daily Chronicle* report, quoted in *The Citizen*, 31 Jan. 85.

favour with his chief and Charles Williams was living at Korti, a stone's throw away from Wolseley's headquarters. The short extract cited above is not the sole indicator that Williams was, in all likelihood, put up to his mischief. A little further on in his *Daily Chronicle* report he reaches the point at which the square advanced: 'The movement was strikingly bold. A commander made of weaker fibre might well have hesitated, but not so Colonel Wilson, who did not fear to realise the risk must be taken.'¹ At this juncture, then, Williams appears to have formed the view that Wilson had been born to command in battle.

It is unnecessary to reprise the harrowing interval between the fall of Stewart and the advance of the square. All the participant sources reflect that it was experienced by the British as an ordeal. Cameron of the *Standard*, shot in the back and killed, was just one of many casualties. At least four other war-correspondents, Burleigh, Villiers, Prior and Pearse, were hit by spent rounds. Sankey Herbert, who notwithstanding his civilian status was clad in a military undress frock, (which would appear to have been one of only two red coats being sported amidst a force otherwise clad in grey and buff), was shot and killed as the square was forming up.² In the event the troops were still hunkered down, returning fire into the scrub, as two o'clock came and went, albeit the reason for this was practical in nature and dictated that the British would have been unable to sally forth before they did in any case. We have seen that when the position was first occupied, Cochrane had jammed the baggage-camels into a hollow square, nose to tail and several rows deep. When Stewart called off the advance and the main body joined the baggage-guard on the knoll, the riding-camels were arrayed around the baggage-camels in an outer ring and jammed in just as tightly. Biscuit-boxes, cases of bully-beef and camel-saddles were heavy, awkward items at the best of times; getting to them was bad enough, but trying to lift them over several rows of recumbent camels, in order to then construct barricades and forts, all the while under a deadly fire, was necessarily a dangerous, physically exacting and time-consuming process.

Beresford notes in his memoirs that he grew so impatient that he felt moved to scribble a note advising Wilson that, 'unless we marched against the enemy at once, we were done.'³ Because he affixes no time to his anecdote, it serves to present him as an advocate of urgency and Wilson as the architect of delay. But Beresford was party to the decision not to make any forward move before 2.00 *pm*, so that his memoirs are somewhat disingenuous in implying that it became necessary for him to press Wilson. It seems more than likely that Beresford wrote and despatched his note at some point after two o'clock. With Wilson already preparing the foray, the reality is that such a message would have been superfluous. Unfortunately one man was killed and a naval officer severely wounded getting it through.⁴

As Wilson observed, 'It was this difficulty of getting around amongst the camels that caused so many delays, and it was quite 2.00 *pm* before the units of the square began to disentangle themselves after leaving the two redoubts in a state in which

¹ Ibid.

² Villiers, *Five Decades*, ii, 66.

³ Beresford, *Memoirs*, ii, 275.

⁴ Ibid, ii, 275.

they could be completed by the garrisons left in them.’¹ It can reasonably be inferred from the subsequent passage of events that Sir Charles gave orders for the square to form up not long after 2.00 *pm*, albeit the best part of an hour would elapse before the British were physically and organizationally ready to advance. We have seen that Verner’s testimony places the second conversation between Wilson and Stewart at some point after 2.00 *pm*, the time at which work on the forts stopped. Recalling that Verner’s diary was not freely available before 2003, how does it bear down on our understanding of the command and control issues surrounding the battle? It suggests, first, that Wilson went to tell Stewart that he was about to give or had already given the order to advance in square; second, it suggests that the wounded general demurred and pressed his successor to delay further; and third, it tells us that Wilson chose to reject the advice. If Wilson was the ditherer that so many secondary sources have chosen to portray, if he genuinely had something to hide, he would surely have covered his trail by incorporating Stewart’s preference for the defensive course of action into his book. After all, the doubts attributed to the general by Verner were entirely rational. The essence of the problem was that no matter how the force was divided between offence and defence, an advancing square was unlikely to contain even a thousand rifles or, more pertinently, fewer than 250 per face. It was certain on that basis to be the smallest and least powerful battle-square the British had yet deployed in the Sudan. In two of the three previous encounters significantly stronger formations had been penetrated by the *anṣār* charge. It was logical to conclude that advancing in such meagre numbers might well result in the same sort of supremely violent denouement as Abu Klea. If the enemy again got to close-quarters, there would be a strong possibility of annihilation. Launch a high-risk attack, or sit tight suffering mounting casualties in the hope that the enemy would come on? The time-consuming process of constructing redoubts, which lasted from approximately 11.15 *am* to 2.00 *pm*, deferred the necessity to jump one way or the other, but in the meantime sitting tight had slowly but surely turned into a living nightmare. The reason why Wilson did not report his second conversation with Stewart in his book is probably plain and simple humility: had he done so it would tend to make it look as if he was extolling his own bravado and powers of decision over those of the much lamented Stewart. Wilson was too much the gentleman to intrude on such territory.

Investigation in depth has shown that historians have been generally inclined to set too much store by ill-informed junior role-players like Marling, and by testimony from Beresford which was committed to print nearly 30 years later. In reality Wilson was working to a plan agreed by a council of colonels, not long after Stewart was wounded. The decision to erect the forts was wholly justifiable, because without them there could have been no hope of a small garrison standing its ground in so poor a defensive position. Had the work been finished sooner, it might have been possible to review the decision to wait for 2.00 *pm*, but the fact of the matter is that the forts were *not* finished until 2.00 *pm* and that the advance took place as soon as practicable thereafter. A closer approximation to the truth is that there was no long and pointless delay at Abu Kru; rather it was the case that that a tactically prudent plan was put into operation, on the basis of decisions made by a cabal of experienced officers. It follows

¹ Wilson, *Korti to Khartum*, 68.

that the 3.00 pm 'H-Hour', of which several prominent testimonies later complained, was not attributable to any procrastination on Sir Charles Wilson's part.

7.5.3 The Fight to the Nile

The 90-minute approach march to the battle proper was far more harrowing for the British than its fleeting climax. Left behind to defend the zariba were 100 19th Hussars under French, 150 Heavies under Major Thomas Davison,¹ 25 rifle-armed naval ratings and about 40 gunners and sailors manning the guns and the Gardner. If it came to a direct assault a few dozen logisticians and medics could also stand to the barricades. Colonel Barrow would be in command of the troops, though technically Beresford was the senior man present. All the infantry companies, four from the Guards, four from the Mounted Infantry and two from 1st Royal Sussex, went out with the square, as did the other half of HCR. No heavy ordnance was taken and no skirmishers were deployed. Small reserve details were posted at the corners. Where 150 camels had been taken out at Abu Klea, this time there were to be only 60. A few carried reserve ammunition and water, but most were bearer-company animals intended to carry casualties. As the square set out, there appears to have been a distinct sense of foreboding abroad. Marling thought the enterprise, 'just like a forlorn hope'. Gleichen was similarly doubtful about the outcome:

*It was neck or nothing, for the fighting force could muster only 900 bayonets, and the enemy were swarming round in thousands. I must say it looked as risky a business as it well could; we all felt it was exceedingly doubtful if the two halves of the force would ever see each other again, but yet it was the only thing possible to be done.*²

Verner was assigned to navigate the formation to the river and prudently zig-zagged it across a series of bare gravel patches, which provided clear fields of fire out to a minimum of 200 yards. The enemy riflemen dogged the advance throughout. Marling wrote, 'We moved slowly, oh so slowly, first to the right and then to the left, all this time under a heavy fire.'³ It may have been too slow for Marling's taste, but his elders and betters were bearding an enemy force with a numerical advantage of not less than 10:1. Above all else, Wilson and Boscawen were determined not to allow the square to fall into the same sort of disarray which had brought near-disaster at Abu Klea. While larger bodies of anşār manoeuvred about the scrub from time to time, as if to threaten a charge, they were kept at bay by company volleys⁴ and long-range artillery fire from the zariba.⁵ When at length the British came up to the low gravel ridge separating the

¹ Ibid, 70.

² Gleichen, *With the Camel Corps*, 156.

³ Marling, *Rifleman and Hussar*, 135.

⁴ That the square from time to time lay down to return fire and that the volleys were fired by companies are facts recorded in one of the picture captions in Verner's *Sketches in the Soudan*. See also Wilson, *Korti to Khartum*, 73-4.

⁵ Macdonald, *Too Late*, 274; Villiers, *Five Decades*, ii, 68.

desert from the flood-plain, they found they had hit the feature in the mouth of a horseshoe-shaped indentation (see Illustration 8) of about half a mile in width.¹

With the battle obviously approaching some kind of denouement, the weight of incoming fire seemed to the British suddenly to double, pouring in from both arms of the horseshoe, the ridge in front and the scrub on the right.² Verner recalled that, 'the bullets came over us like a storm.'³ The British volleyed back at the high ground, but nevertheless took a significant number of casualties in return. Wilson was walking behind the RMLI company when one of the marines in the rear rank fell dead at his feet. Over the next few minutes another six men were shot dead, in addition to which there may also have been a score of wounded. The doctors and medics would have been at least momentarily overwhelmed: indeed there were now so many casualties that there were no longer any vacant litters or *cacolets* left. 'Things began to look ugly', wrote Wilson. 'Some of the officers told me afterwards that they thought we should have been obliged to turn back without reaching the Nile. That, however, we should never have done as failure meant annihilation.'⁴ Verner perceived that, 'the square was a little shaken and things looked very serious indeed.'⁵ If the troops were rattled, they kept their heads and gave no outward sign of it: 'The steadiness of the front and left face of the square was most remarkable and did great honour to the Mounted Infantry, Guards and Marines composing them.'⁶ Succinct as always, Marling noted that, 'The men behaved A1.'

The British picked up their wounded and continued to advance. It had been a long wait for Nūr 'Anqara, but now, at about 4.30 pm, the British were exactly where he wanted them; surrounded on three sides, softened up by rifle-fire and only a few hundred yards from two concealed phalanxes of shock troops. At a given signal around 5,000 men charged onto the forward slope. Remarkably the British cheered. Verner said of this moment, 'This was just what we wanted',⁷ while Marling observed, 'By Jove, the men did buck up.'⁸ A Guards officer told Macdonald afterwards that the officers quickly silenced the cheering, 'as we were afraid the enemy would then turn back without coming on.'⁹ The attack fell mainly on the GCR and MICR companies in the front and left faces, the steadiest shots in the force, and in a matter of only minutes had been shot to pieces with company volleys. According to Wilson's later supplementary report to his official despatch, around 250-300 anṣār were killed in the charge. It is by no means impossible that total Mahdīst casualties in the day topped a thousand. It has not previously been possible to divide the total British loss between the zariba and the square. Now, by reconciling the handwritten regimental returns uncovered with the War Diary, with a number of other primary sources, a process too painstaking to recount here, it has been possible to calculate the loss on the British

¹ Whitaker (ed.), Verner Diary, 54.

² Verner, *Sketches in the Soudan*. Unfortunately Verner's sketches/pages/captions are un-numbered.

³ Whitaker (ed.), Verner Diary, 54.

⁴ Wilson, *Korti to Khartum*, 76.

⁵ Whitaker (ed.), Verner Diary, lecture notes, p. xxiii.

⁶ Ibid, 54.

⁷ Verner, *Sketches in the Soudan*.

⁸ Marling, *Rifleman and Hussar*, 135.

⁹ Macdonald, *Too Late*, 275.



Illustration 8: Climax of Abu Kru

Although it is difficult to be 100% sure without archaeological excavation, this is the most likely spot for the battle's denouement. Although gradient is barely perceptible, the photograph is taken from the top of the gravel ridge looking into the low ground on which the square was standing. The zariba is on the horizon at the extreme right. [Image Source: Fieldwork Phase, 2009.]

defensive position as 1 officer (Quartermaster Arthur Lima, 19th Hussars), 2 war-correspondents (Cameron and Herbert) and 6 NCOs and men killed, plus 6 officers & 60 NCOs and men wounded. The casualties incurred in the square compute to 18 NCOs and men killed or mortally wounded (3), with 2 officers & 25-30 NCOs and men wounded.

The British reached the river just before nightfall, drank their fill, posted pickets and fell into the sleep of the dead. The following morning, 20 January, Wilson began fortifying the closest of the villages, which the British erroneously termed 'Gubat'. Leaving his wounded under a strong guard, he then marched the rest of the command back to the zariba, to help Barrow's men pack up and advance to the Nile. There was a moment when it looked like the enemy were sallying out of Metemmeh in full force, but when Wilson changed direction, to give battle, they promptly fell back into the town. The garrison at the zariba greeted the return of their comrades with cheers. With a hundred camels lost on the night march and a further hundred or so killed on the defensive position,¹ the logistic carrying capacity of the column had been badly eroded. It did not help that the camels had been knee-haltered for more than 24 hours, had not eaten for four days and had been the best part of a week without water. Barrow's ponies, so vital to the Desert Column's scouting, early warning and intelligence-gathering functions, were all but on their last legs.² Nobody was more conscious of this than Barrow, one of the most fastidious managers of horse-flesh in the Army. In addition to those camels which had been killed outright, a great many more had been wounded; quite how many the habitual insouciance of the dromedary made it impossible to tell. Cochrane found that his own camel had been shot through the head a few inches below its eye-line, but observed that it, 'ate as usual when it could get anything.'³ Macdonald noted that, 'Even the unwounded camels were in 'wretched condition'.⁴ As a result the officers of the transport staff advised Sir Charles that it would be impossible to move all of the baggage to the river in one go. It was decided that Major Davison would stay behind with a detachment of 50 Heavies, to garrison the redoubt on the spur, until such time as sufficient baggage-camels could be sent back to recover the balance of the stores. Even so, it proved necessary to carry 55 of the casualties to the Nile on stretchers.⁵

On the return march to the river, the RMLI company was sent across to the scene of the climactic fight to bury the seven fatalities left on that part of the field.⁶ Wilson accompanied the marines and was able to secure a few prisoners. When at length they were interrogated, they let slip the information which would shape his decision-making over the days ahead:

We found two or three wounded, whom we carried on with us. From these we had confirmation of the fall of Omdurman, and heard that another force under

¹ Gleichen, *With the Camel Corps*, 165.

² Marling, *Rifleman and Hussar*, 138.

³ Dundonald, *My Army Life*, 49.

⁴ Macdonald, *Too Late*, 283.

⁵ Burleigh, *Daily Telegraph*, 24 Jan. 85.

⁶ Wilson, *Korti to Khartum*, 91.

*Feki Mustafa*¹ [sic] was on its way from Khartum [sic] to fight us, and that one was also coming up the river from Berber; so we had every prospect of more fighting.²

There was very little daylight left by the time the column reached 'Gubat'. The war-diary noted the time of arrival as 4.45 pm.³ The late afternoon was utilised in reorganizing, unpacking, making the wounded comfortable and improving the defensibility of the position.

When Wilson wrote *From Korti to Khartum*, which was not merely a facsimile of his campaign journal but also intended as a vindication of his actions, he inserted a passage which reflected on the condition of the Desert Column when it reached the river. Although it was meant to encapsulate something of the difficulties he had inherited and in no sense intended as a criticism of Stewart's generalship, it nonetheless offers a number of interesting insights into just how badly the crossing of the Bayūda had backfired.

We had now secured ourselves on the Nile, and this is the place to consider the state in which we got there. First as regards the men. They had had no proper sleep on the night of the 16th-17th. On the 17th they had been roughly handled by the enemy, and fully realised they had had a narrow escape. On the night of the 17th-18th no sleep, and many of them employed all night on fatigue-duty, moving and loading up stores at the zeribah [sic]. On the 18th filling up water-tanks and waterskins at the wells; then the weary night-march through the thick grass and mimosa bush from 3 P.M. to 7 A.M. After this the trying time in the zeribah, and the march to the Nile, with its fight, [sic] followed by a bivouac without blankets, and with little food. [*Wilson's footnote reads: On the 19th the men were under fire from about 8 A.M. till 5 P.M. – about nine hours.] Lastly the march back to the zeribah on the 20th, with the heavy work of dismantling the zeribah, loading up the camels, and carrying the wounded down. It may be said that the men arrived at the Nile after four days of exceptional exertion under a tropical sun, without having had one night's rest, and having lost, in killed and wounded, more than one-tenth of their number. They were in capital spirits, and the complete success of the previous day's fight had quite restored their confidence in themselves, which had been a little shaken at Abu Klea. Still they needed rest; and we knew no reinforcements were going to be sent or would start until we could get a message through to Lord Wolseley.*

Next as regards the camels. They had been watered on the 13th and 14th, and did not get water again until the 19th and 20th. They had therefore

¹ Wilson consistently renders this name as 'Feki Mustafa'. In an official report entitled *Report on Proceedings from January 24th to February 1st*, Stuart-Wortley, Wilson's assistant on the intelligence staff, rendered it as the 'Fakir Mustapha'. It is not inconceivable that this man was one and the same 'Sheikh Mustafa el Amin', referred to in evidence brought before the Intelligence Department in Cairo on 23 Feb. 1893; see Beresford, *Memoirs*, ii, 310.

² Wilson, *Korti to Khartum*, 91-2.

³ War-diary entry 20 Jan. 85.

been without water for from six to seven days, having been previously accustomed to water every second or third day. The camels started from Jakdul with about 12 lb of dura [sic] each or 3 lb a-day [sic] for four days, the usual allowance being 9 lb. They were thus on one-third rations, which they did not always get, for four days only out of six. From 2 P.M. on the 16th to 3 A.M. on the 18th, some thirty-seven hours, they were tied down so tightly in the zeribah, before Abu Klea, that they could not move a limb, and I doubt if they were fed at all during that time. Then from 3 P.M. on 18th to 7 A.M. on 19th [sic], or sixteen hours, they were on the march, part of the time struggling through savas grass and mimosa by night; and they probably had their loads on for seventeen or eighteen hours. This was followed by another tying down in a zeribah for over twenty-four hours without any food. Can it be wondered at that the poor beasts were hardly able to crawl down to the river with their loads, and that they were practically useless without some rest and food? The result almost justified the mot [sic], that we thought we had found in the camel an animal that required neither food, drink, nor rest: we certainly acted as if the camel were a piece of machinery. The sore backs from careless loading in the dark, and from tumbling about during the night-marches, were sickening to look at.

The cavalry horses were also quite done up. The way in which Barrow managed to bring the 19th Hussars across the desert is one of the best things in the expedition; but the horses had only a short drink at Abu Klea, and then they had barely enough to wash their mouths out until they got to the Nile on the 20th. The scouting of the Hussars during the march was admirably done; they were ubiquitous. But want of food and water no horses can fight against, and they were but a sorry spectacle as they moved out of the zeribah to go down to the river. They reached the Nile almost useless as cavalry, and could only be employed for scouting purposes, at short distances from the camp.¹

This then was the state of the 'flying column' which might, at any point, be ordered to dash 98 miles south to Khartoum. It is apparent that the baggage-camels and ponies would have needed a significant period of rehabilitation before marching anywhere. Many of the animals which had been chafed raw by ineptly loaded baggage were still walking for the present, but would be destined in the fullness of time to expire from a fatal combination of distress and infection. If the Desert Column received orders to go anywhere in a hurry, it now looked as if it was going to have to walk.

7.6 BEFORE METEMMEH

During the march back to the river, Wilson had pondered whether it was advisable to make an immediate attack on Metemmeh the following day. With the column having suffered so many casualties in two unanticipated stand-up fights, the tactical situation was much different from the benign scenario imagined by Wolseley when he penned Stewart's orders. For one thing, the nearby town seemed much larger and more

¹ Wilson, *Korti to Khartum*, 93-7.

populous than had been anticipated. Furthermore, there was every reason to believe that the number of anṣār fighters still present in the town ran into the several thousands. Given that the column was ensconced on the Nile and already capable of effecting a junction with Gordon's steamers, whenever they deigned to put in an appearance, there was a reasonable case to be made that Metemmeh could and should be left alone until such time as reinforcements came up. Wilson recollected that:

I thought over the whole question, and considered that the political effect of not taking Matammeh [sic] would be so bad that its capture ought to be attempted. Besides, as we had seen no signs of the approach of the expected reinforcements to the enemy, I hoped we might be able to establish ourselves in the town before they arrived. I had heard that on the north side of the town, and near its centre, there was a large government building; and I determined if possible to attack this, feeling sure that if it were once secured the place would be ours.¹

In view of the accusations of procrastination and hesitancy later levelled at Wilson, the rapidity and boldness with which he intended storming Metemmeh is noteworthy. The commanding officers were duly called in for orders. The 19th Hussars, GCR, MICR, two HCR companies, the guns, the Naval Brigade and a slice of the medical staff would be committed to the operation. The units concerned were to parade at 5.00 *am* the following morning.

The war-diary entry for 21 January itemised the morning parade-states of the units committed to the operation.² The necessity both to leave a viable guard force at 'Gubat', and at the same time be prepared to bring in Major Davison, meant that only 842 fighting men would be involved in the attack on Metemmeh. Unit strengths were as follows:

RN	24	(1 x Gardner)
HCR	120	(Nos. 1 & 2 Companies only)
GCR	269	
MICR	285	
19th Hussars	67	
RE	19	
RA	36	(3 x 7-pdr RML)
Medical Bearer-Coy	22	(2 x sections)

The presence of the headquarters staff, some of the war-correspondents and perhaps a score of native drivers would still not have edged the force above 900 men all told.

¹ Ibid, 98.

² War-diary entry 21 Jan. 85. The text reverses the strengths given by Airlie for the Naval Brigade and the Royal Artillery; the Naval Brigade did not have three guns and the artillery only one.

The much-reduced strength of French's squadron, a mere 67 men, was in part a reflection of how many ponies were unfit for duty, although Barrow had also despatched a separate patrol of unknown strength to scout upriver for any sign of the Faqī Muṣṭafa's approach.¹

Though the British were uncertain quite how many anṣār were still inside Metemmeh, it appears on the basis of intelligence later acquired by Verner² that there were about 3,000 of whom one-third were equipped with rifles. If this estimate was not hugely wide of the mark, it would suggest that at least as many men again had dispersed after the battle of two days earlier. There were also four pieces of artillery, two of which had been emplaced to cover the river and two the landward approach.

7.6.1 Wilson's 'Silly' Operation?

By 8.00 *am* the infantry and artillery were about two-thirds of the way through their approach march, while Barrow and his hussars were skirmishing on the open desert flank with about 60 enemy horsemen. Scanning Metemmeh with his binoculars, Wilson could discern 'no regular openings in its mud walls.'³ Just in front of the western end of the town, however, he could see a row of enemy banners and what appeared to be a defended trench, although it was actually an outlying earthwork. He had formed the view, perhaps on the basis of something the prisoners had said, that the best avenue of approach lay on the desert side. He decided to ride on ahead to join Barrow, leaving Boscawen and the main body at the halt pending his return. If Sir Charles had any sort of escort over his mile-long ride, it was the trooper, or brace of troopers, who had ridden in with Barrow's most recent report. It can again be usefully noted in passing that this too was hardly the action of a man who was in any way improperly anxious about his personal safety. When at length he reached the 19th Hussars he found them, 'in a capital position on some gravel swellings of ground which quite commanded the town, and from whence artillery-fire would take the trench...with its defenders, in reverse.'⁴ His hunch vindicated and his mind made up, Wilson set off to bring up the main body. Unfortunately his mount, in all likelihood a pony borrowed from the hussars, was on its last legs. He had not gone far before he was obliged to dismount and lead the animal.⁵

Wilson now noticed that Boscawen had thrown a line of skirmishers forward and that firing had broken out. Five volleys were fired in all, at the extraordinary range of 2,000 yards, at the crowds of refugees fleeing Metemmeh for the open desert. The range notwithstanding, the fire was not without effect.⁶ Not long after the final salvo, Wilson observed the main body spring into motion, swing away from the original axis of advance and begin moving in the direction of the river. Hurrying on as best he could, Wilson bumped into a messenger. For some reason he chose to blank out the

¹ Whitaker (ed.), Verner Diary, 60; Macdonald, *Too Late*, 290.

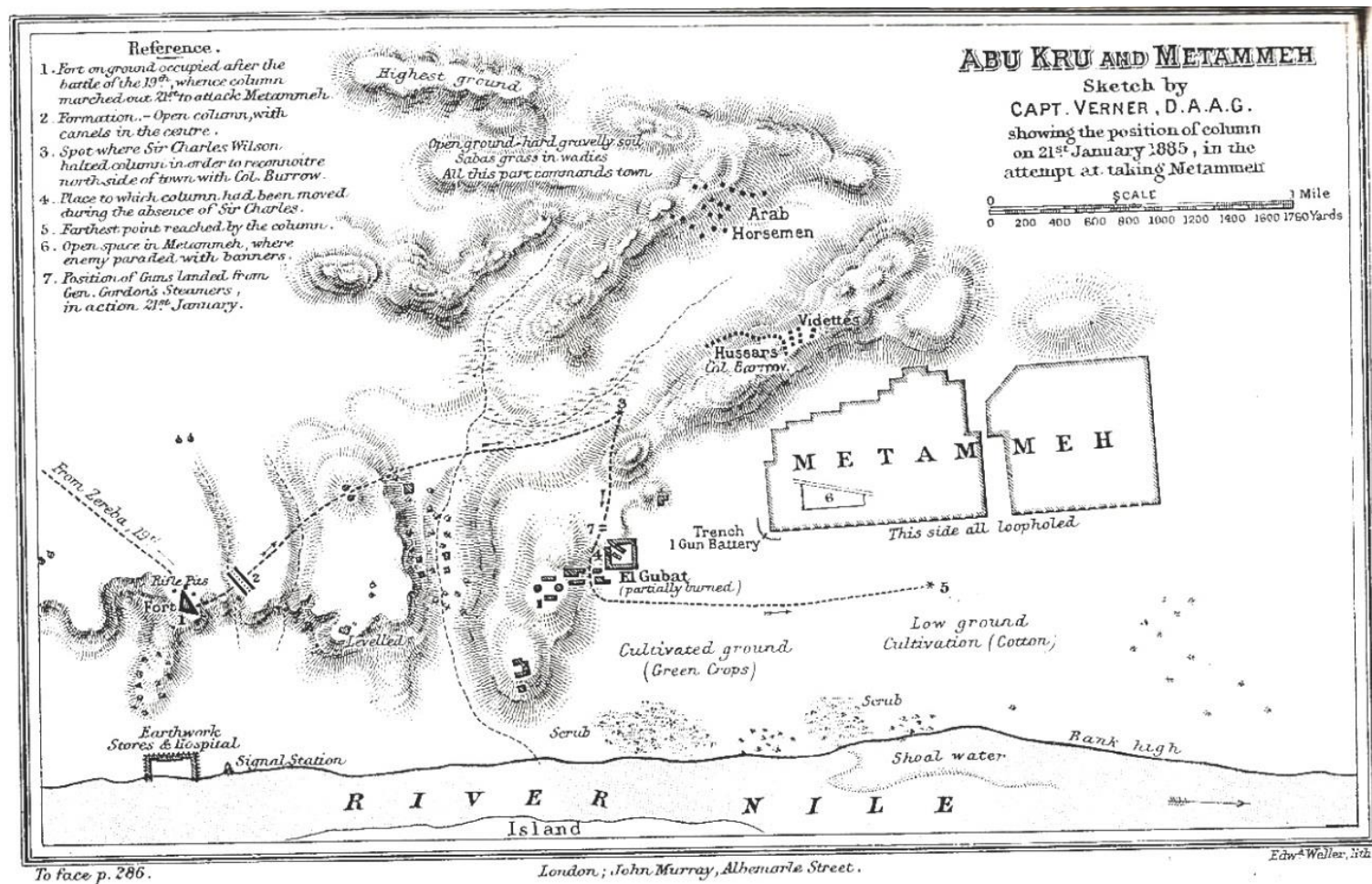
² Whitaker (ed.), Verner Diary, 72.

³ Wilson, *Korti to Khartum*, 100.

⁴ Ibid, 101.

⁵ Macdonald, *Too Late*, 288.

⁶ Gleichen, *With the Camel Corps*, 169.



Map 8: Wilson's Operation at Metemmeh

Verner's map reflects how Wilson's attack was diverted from the desert flank to the river flank by Boscawen's over-hasty response to a sighting of flags.

[Image Source: Macdonald, *Too Late for Gordon and Khartoum*.]

man's name in *From Korti to Khartum*, failing even to give an initial letter, as such narratives often did. This tells us that it was not an anonymous trooper from the 19th Hussars, but more than likely Airlie or Burleigh, known to be the only other men who were mounted that day. Whoever the courier was, he relayed a message from Boscawen to the effect that he was manoeuvring to intercept a body of the enemy moving west along the riverbank towards British-held 'Gubat'.¹ In fact while this was the name of the nearby mid-river island, the village known to the locals as Gubat was located immediately west of Metemmeh, the best part of two miles from the British lodgement.²

By the time Wilson caught up with Boscawen, he had moved the force 1,000 yards to the south and come to a halt behind a deserted village (the real Gubat). The nearby buildings were located towards the edge of the gravel plateau, and commanded a good view of Metemmeh and the cultivated flood plain. Pressed by Wilson to indicate the position of the force manoeuvring against the lodgement, Boscawen was unable to do so. It was suggested that the enemy must be hidden amongst the belt of crops and date palms lining the river.³ Macdonald would discover the truth of the matter later in the day, when the troops returned to camp. 'As we were advancing,' his informant told him, 'we saw some flags below one of the villages near the river, and the column was diverted in that direction so as not to leave the camp open to attack. As we advanced we found only a few of the enemy, the flags we had seen being stuck over the graves of some of the chiefs who had fallen on the 19th.'⁴ It would seem that nobody shared this explanation with Wilson at the time, suggesting that Boscawen either failed to realise his mistake or chose not to admit it. It is seldom a good idea for a commander to counter-march his troops, as a function of the indecision it necessarily implies, so Wilson accepted that he would now have to keep his force interposed between Metemmeh and the lodgement. Accordingly, he now abandoned his first choice plan to attack from the north, in favour of operating to the west and south. Over the next two hours the gunners peppered the mud walls, in a forlorn attempt to open a breach with 7-pound common shell. In the meantime the infantry promenaded across the flood plain in square, all the while under a heavy fire from the loopholed south wall. Wilson searched in vain for a place where it might be carried without excessive loss, but eventually gave the enterprise up and reversed the direction of march, so as to re-join the guns and their company-strength escort. The return journey had to be hurried along when a cannon opened fire from the south wall.⁵

It was now that a galloper rode in from Barrow, with the news that four of Gordon's steamers were approaching from the south. The flotilla had already put in at the lodgement, where Verner had gone on board the flagship, greeted the senior officers and asked them to proceed downriver to support the British attack. The vessels and commanders were:

¹ Wilson, *Korti to Khartum*, 101.

² See Map 8, drawn by Verner.

³ Wilson, *Korti to Khartum*, 101-2.

⁴ Macdonald, *Too Late*, 289.

⁵ Wilson, *Korti to Khartum*, 104.

<i>Talahawiyeh</i>	Brigadier-General Nushi Pasha ¹
<i>Tawfīqiyeh</i>	Colonel <u>Khashm</u> al-Mūs Bey
<i>Bordein</i>	Colonel ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd Bey
<i>Sāfia</i>	Colonel Maḥmūd Bey

There were half a dozen guns and more than 500 Egyptian and Sudanese troops aboard the steamers. When Verner put in to the riverbank, he disembarked 250 men and four 9-pounders and then marched to effect a junction with Wilson. Verner’s Sudanese gunners made ‘capital practice’² at a range of 800 yards but, for all the proficiency of their crews, the slightly heavier field guns proved no more capable of breaching than had the British mountain-guns.

Wilson left the artillery officers to their business and had a long talk with the two Shā’iqī steamer captains, Colonels Khashm al-Mūs Bey and ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd Bey. The former was a veteran in his fifties and the latter a much younger relative, possibly a nephew, in his mid-twenties. The ubiquitous Verner was also on hand to impart the critical news that the steamer captains had spotted the Faqī Muṣṭafa’s force, some 18 miles south of the British lodgement, earlier in the day. This implied that the enemy could be expected to arrive during the course of the afternoon or, if the British were lucky, the following morning.³ It transpired that while three of the steamers had been loitering just north of the Sabalūka Gorge and the Sixth Cataract since October, the fourth, *Bordein*, had been sent downriver by Gordon as recently as 15 December.⁴ The Sudanese colonels reported that there were documents aboard *Bordein* which Gordon Pasha had said should be given to the ‘Ingiliz’. Wilson brought the conversation to a close and called for a cavalry galloper. He quickly composed a note to Lieutenant Colonel Bonham, the GCR officer in charge at the lodgement, which first warned that the enemy were closing from the south and might attack that afternoon, and then directed that the plan to bring in Davison’s detachment be enacted without delay. With the message safely on its way, Wilson went to see how the gunners were faring. The west wall was riddled with small holes but otherwise intact. The continuing flow of refugees to the north suggests that the bombardment had at least caused a certain amount of alarm and despondency.⁵ Ammunition for the 7-pounders was running low and, with a battle against the Faqī Muṣṭafa in the offing, it would be prudent to conserve what little was left. When Wilson went to confer with Boscawen they were quick to agree that the best course of action was to break off the fight and fall back to protect the lodgement. Moments later the order was given for the guns to cease fire. When the signallers flashed ‘Force withdrawing’ to the rooftop heliograph station back at ‘Gubat’, Macdonald and the other spectators gathered there could not help feeling a mixture of surprise and disappointment.⁶

¹ It is not inconceivable that Nushi Pasha may have been a major general.

² Whitaker (ed.), *Verner Diary*, 62.

³ Wilson, *Korti to Khartum*, 105; Whitaker (ed.), *Verner Diary*, 62.

⁴ Wilson, *Korti to Khartum*, 110. While Wilson gives 14 Dec., Gordon’s last journal entry suggests that he intended to send *Bordein* downriver the following day.

⁵ Macdonald, *Too Late*, 291.

⁶ Ibid, 292.

7.6.2 Disengagement

Leaving aside Wolseley's journal, the next most notable written attack on Wilson's decision to break off the engagement occurs in the memoirs of Lieutenant General the Earl of Dundonald, (Captain Lord Cochrane at the time). By the time *My Army Life* was published, Wilson had been dead for the best part of two decades, so Dundonald was at liberty to write as he pleased. There was another officer present that day who was similarly outraged by the withdrawal decision, but did Wilson a lot more harm at the time. Chapter 4 established that it was 'Bloody' Pigott, shortly to be sent back to Korti with despatches, who denounced Wilson's conduct of operations to Wolseley.

For the present, though, the focus is on Cochrane, who by now had succeeded to the command of No. 1 Company HCR. When the order to withdraw was given, he was commanding a skirmish line facing the west wall of Metemmeh. Evidently he was animated and still believed that it would be both possible and necessary to carry the town by storm. When Airlie rode up with orders to retire, Cochrane was outraged and insisted that the brigade-major tell Sir Charles that he felt that they, 'ought to go on and burn the place down.'¹ Airlie apparently sympathised, but no doubt told Cochrane that he had best get on and withdraw as ordered. When in the 1920s he got around to writing his memoirs, Dundonald gave vent to the following indictment:

*The great mistake made by Sir Charles Wilson on this day was to show his teeth and then not bite; it disheartened our men and emboldened the enemy. Once embarked on the enterprise, to my mind it was folly to leave the town in the enemy's hand untouched, close to us and our line of communication, a centre for enemy forces, and from which nightly large bodies of men issued and marched close to our bivouac beating defiance on their tom-toms.*²

There might be some excuse for the young Lord Cochrane to think these thoughts, but the older, wiser Earl of Dundonald, a retired general-officer writing with the benefit of 30 years' hindsight, ought perhaps to have known better.

The campaign objective was to save Khartoum. While Wolseley had specified that Metemmeh should be captured, in effect as a 'decisive condition' in modern doctrinal terms, his vision at the time was that the Desert Column would still be substantially intact. It was not as if there was a much more powerful British force hard on its heels, such that the Camel Corps could be thought of as an expendable vanguard. Today officers are formally trained to ask 'Question 4', the final stage in the process of 'mission analysis', an important component of 'mission command', which is a decentralised command philosophy designed to devolve as much fine detail as possible to the next level of command down. 'Question 4' is 'Has the situation changed since I received my orders?' If the answer is no, then a commander should proceed precisely as his immediate superior has conceived and directed. If, on the other hand, the answer is yes, then the said commander is at liberty to adapt intelligently his part in the higher plan, provided always that he does not imperil the attainment of his next

¹ Dundonald, *My Army Life*, 51.

² Ibid, 51.

two higher commanders' intent. In the situation now confronting Wilson, Question 4 plainly applied: Wolseley's intent was to relieve Khartoum; implicit in his plan was the possibility that this might have to be effected quickly by the Desert Column alone; but in the meantime the army commander was counting on Wilson to get through to Gordon and back to Korti, before having to make his next critical decision. The Desert Column had already been badly mauled and could ill afford the sort of losses which would inevitably be entailed in ejecting several thousand anṣār fighters from the streets of Metemmeh. Such an operation would entail clearing house-to-house, through an endless sequence of close-quarter engagements. Not only had the situation changed at the operational level, but it had also changed during the course of the day at the grand tactical level.

Dundonald's memoirs made no allowance for the facts of the tactical situation as Wilson understood them, when he took a perfectly rational decision to disengage. What sort of commander would allow himself to be attacked by a numerically superior enemy force from the rear, whilst still obsessively engaged with a strongpoint in front? What sort of commander would leave a hundred wounded men to be massacred in the west, while he was fighting for a non-essential objective in the east? Wilson had every reason to suppose that reinforcements would be diverted across the Bayūda as soon as Wolseley had been apprised of the necessity. He had concluded that there would be time enough to deal with Metemmeh when reinforcements came up. In the meantime the more pressing imperative was for the gravely weakened Desert Column to secure its lodgement on the Nile, and get on with the task of communicating with Gordon as a matter of urgency. With the arrival of the steamers the means of doing so was at hand. To paraphrase Kipling, it is clear that Wilson kept his head, while some other officers around him, Lord Cochrane included, were losing theirs.

The withdrawal to the lodgement was skilfully handled by Boscawen. Moving the Guards and Mounted Infantry alternately and slowly,¹ as if to suggest that the British were quite unafraid of anything the anṣār might do, he succeeded in deterring any hint of counterattack. The hamlets lying along the line of retreat were fired as the troops passed. The rest of the return march was so quickly accomplished that the marching infantry beat the steamers back to 'Gubat'. It was something after 3.00 *pm* before everybody was safely in.² The only life lost before the walls of Metemmeh had been that of Sergeant Cowley of B Company MICR, shot dead inside the square.³ Between six and eight men would appear to have been wounded.⁴

There was a certain amount of alarm and consternation abroad when Wilson rode in to Bonham's perimeter.

When I returned to camp between three and four, I found they had made preparations for moving the wounded down to the river, and were waiting orders to do so. There was some excitement about the expected attack, and

¹ Gleichen, *With the Camel Corps*, 174.

² Wilson, *Korti to Khartum*, 109.

³ MICR casualty return of 23 Jan. 85; see Airlie Papers, NAS 02024 GD16-52-57, 10-B.

⁴ Figures extracted from reports in the *Standard* of 29 Jan. 85, one of which was written by Prior in lieu of the deceased Cameron.

_____ [sic] was much excited, declaring the position a bad one, too far from water for the thirsty British soldier, &c.

*I was at first averse to moving the wounded to a place where they would have no shade except such as tents could give; but after talking to Stewart, and finding that he thought it the best plan, I gave the necessary orders.*¹

It was decided that GCR would stay on the high ground to garrison the village, but that the rest of the force would entrench itself just above the high-water riverbank. This was undoubtedly the right course of action, as the lodgement constituted 'vital ground' and the ridge above its 'key terrain'. Orders were given that the force was to stand to in square in the event the Faqī Muṣṭafa attacked before an improvised defensive perimeter had been established.²

7.7 THE NEWS FROM KHARTOUM

Sir Charles now turned to his role as head of intelligence and sat down in a quiet spot with Gordon's journals and letters.

*The first two letters I opened were addressed to the officer commanding Her Majesty's troops: one was an order to Nashi Pasha [sic], the Egyptian commanding the four steamers, to deliver them over to the English; the other a most characteristic letter telling us to remove all Egyptians, whether pashas, beys or privates – "those hens," he called them – and not to allow one of them to go up to Khartum again. In other letters he wrote in strong terms of the uselessness and cowardice of these men, and begged that if the steamers were not manned by British sailors, they should return to him with none but Sudanese soldiers and sailors. These letters were dated in October, when he first sent the steamers down to await our arrival, which he then expected weekly. I next opened two letters from Gordon to Lord Wolseley, which did not give much news; and at last opened one to Watson, knowing Gordon would write openly to him on the situation. The letter was dated 14th December, and in it Gordon said he expected a crisis within the next ten days, or about Christmas-day [sic]. He evidently had given up all hope of help from outside, and asked Watson to say goodbye to his friends and relations. This agreed with his letter of the 4th November, which said he had provisions enough to hold out until the middle of December, but that after that it would be difficult to do so.*³

Twenty-seven days had passed since Christmas.

¹ Wilson, *Korti to Khartum*, 109-110. I infer from Verner's diary entry of the same date that the name in the gap is most likely Beresford's. There is a hint in Gleichen about 'various counsels' prevailing at this time, which, read in conjunction with Verner and Wilson leads me to believe that there may been a fairly heated exchange at this point. Quite who was involved, beyond (probably) Beresford and Wilson, it is impossible to say. It would be unsurprising if tempers were beginning to fray given the ordeals of the previous few days.

² War-diary entry 21 Jan. 85.

³ Wilson, *Korti to Khartum*, 110-112.

There is little room to doubt, that by the time he had finished perusing the letters, Wilson would have sensed that it was already too late for Gordon. Even so, as long as there was glimmer of hope, he would have no choice but to proceed with the ill-conceived steamer dash, an operation which at low-Nile had plenty of potential to end in disaster. Before he could possibly depart for the south, it would first be necessary to ascertain whether or not there really were two powerful enemy forces converging on Gubat and, if there were, somehow overcome the problem. The key imperative was to keep the lodgement secure, without which there could be no prospect whatever of saving Khartoum. Military norms dictated that there could be no question of the commander passing on his responsibilities if another engagement likely to imperil the very survival of the command was in the offing. As Wilson himself put it, 'I had every reason to believe that forces of the enemy were advancing against us from the north and the south, and I could not leave the small force in its position on the Nile without ascertaining whether it was likely to be attacked.'¹ There were also good reasons why Wolseley had nominated his chief of intelligence as the best choice to meet with Gordon, so sending another officer in his stead was not to be contemplated until such time as it became obvious that Wilson was likely to be long detained by a pressing enemy threat. In the circumstances, the need to verify operational reality by reconnoitring the enemy's avenues of approach would preclude Wilson making an immediate start for Khartoum. Instead, he would send the 19th Hussars to probe upriver first thing in the morning and, if they reported no immediate danger from the south, would then take a brace of steamers downriver to check the approaches from Berber. Two MICR companies would provide extra firepower and act as landing-parties. Wilson intended paying particular attention to the village of Sayala where, the steamer captains had heard tell, a substantial enemy force had been concentrated.²

In order to formulate an objective assessment of Wilson's decisions and actions, it is necessary to recognize that five key factors were now in play. First, it appeared more than likely that at some point within the ensuing 12-48 hours the British would find themselves compelled to fight a defensive action against fresh and powerful Mahdist forces. Second, a written injunction from Gordon, (handed over with his journals), not to send any Egyptian 'hens' back to Khartoum, implied the necessity to reorganize four randomly mixed steamer crews in such a fashion as to produce two entirely Sudanese ones. Third, the heavy losses in men and camels, combined with the played-out state of the remaining animals, meant that the Desert Column could no longer be regarded as a hard-marching manoeuvre asset. Moreover, it was now incapable of fighting its way into Khartoum. Fourth, Wolseley's orders to Stewart included a requirement to despatch a major convoy for Jakdul Wells to bring up more supplies. Fifth, the only expression of higher commander's intent immediately articulated by the same set of orders was for the Desert Column to hold its ground and wait for the River Column to come up. It has already been established that a separate note from Buller forecast that this would not be for some weeks to come, and that

¹ Ibid, 112.

² Ibid, 114-5.

Stewart's orders made no allowance for the Desert Column to press south on the basis of a devolved decision.

His reading complete, Wilson went to inform Boscawen that his examination of Gordon's papers would compel him to make a river dash for Khartoum as soon as was practicably possible, but that the sacrifice of at least one day to reconnaissance and intelligence-gathering would be unavoidable. Boscawen was to take command in Wilson's absence and ensure that the river lodgement was properly entrenched. As soon as he had briefed his deputy, Sir Charles turned his thoughts to communicating all the recent developments to Wolseley. Wilson, or perhaps another senior officer acting for him, selected 'Bloody' Pigott to act as the courier.¹ This might possibly have been a tribute to Pigott's soldierly qualities, as navigating across such distances was a far from everyday skill and automatically ruled out the great majority of non-commissioned personnel, but nonetheless would turn out from Wilson's personal point of view not to be a wise choice. In the event, it was decided that Pigott would not depart until the morrow, as none of the horses or camels looked like they were up to making an immediate start.

It is now necessary to address the assertion (Allen 1931) that Beresford played an important part in the decision to conduct upstream and downstream reconnaissance. The argument goes that Wilson merely deferred to Beresford's proposal, but that the latter's motive was actually to buy time to recover from his incapacitating injury – the notorious boil on the backside. Allen contends that Beresford behaved dishonourably by never admitting his part in the proceedings, and that Wilson nobly shouldered the blame without ever hinting at the fact that reconnaissance had been Beresford's idea. Thus the proposition relies from the outset on a somewhat improbable conspiracy of silence. What gives credence to Allen's case, however, is that he claims to have run the two paragraphs outlining his contention past Stuart-Wortley, who purportedly approved their content. Born in 1857, Stuart-Wortley would have been in his seventies by the time Allen engaged with him,² but nonetheless makes for a credible witness. The problem for Allen is that the two paragraphs in question embrace a significant anomaly, to the effect that the steamers reconnoitred upstream one day and downstream the next. In fact they went downstream only, on the first of the two days at issue, and did not leave their moorings at all the following day. The upstream reconnaissance was also mounted on the first day, but by the cavalry. These are things which Stuart-Wortley must have known. It has not been possible to identify any separate verification of Allen's theory, save in so far as Beresford states in his memoirs that Wilson showed him the letters from Gordon. While this at least tends to confirm that a conversation must have taken place between the two most senior officers, in broadly the time-frame at issue, that fact alone is in no sense surprising. Otherwise the sources, across the board, are silent on the subject. In a sense Allen's contention is also substantially irrelevant, since the *decision* to conduct reconnaissance was Wilson's, whether it was his original

¹ Ibid, 115.

² Stuart-Wortley was also a retired major general. Notoriously he had been fired as a divisional commander by Haig, for purportedly demonstrating a want of offensive spirit on the first day of the Somme.

conception or not, and it is he who, quite rightly, has always had to shoulder the responsibility for it. Allen certainly presses his case too far in suggesting that Wilson was cognizant of Beresford's motive, a notion which immediately strays into the realm of the far-fetched. What Beresford most needed was to go under the surgeon's knife.¹ Instead he was stretchered aboard the *Talahawiyeh* for the downstream reconnaissance. Thus the Allen contention would be, on the one hand, that Wilson contrived a phase of operations to allow the senior naval officer time to make a recovery, but on the other, that instead of sending him to the surgeons he took him out for a substantially pointless pleasure trip on the river. Such a scenario I would judge to lie outside the bounds of credibility. Regardless of Stuart-Wortley's potential standing as an eyewitness, there is not actually any guarantee that he *knew* what passed between Wilson and Beresford, and no guarantee, either, that with the passage of four decades and more that he might not have *imagined* that he knew. Taken in the round, Allen's proposition is both holed and devoid of independent verification, for which reason I am inclined to regard it as something of a red-herring. It also predicated on the conventional 'Too late!' interpretation, the two-day myth, a much bigger issue and one which we will now move on to address in some detail.

7.8 THE PURPORTED DELAY

We now turn to the most substantive accusation levelled at Wilson; the proposition that he could have set out for Khartoum two days earlier than he did, and that had he done so Gordon would have been saved.² The previous section explained why Wilson felt it necessary to devote a day to reconnaissance and establishes that it was a militarily rational and justifiable decision. It might further be usefully recollected that HMG had specifically stated that it set more store by the avoidance of disaster to the relief column, (such as might be the outcome of converging attacks), than by the salvation of one general officer, albeit we cannot be sure whether Wilson knew of that particular Hartington-Wolseley exchange or not.

Sir Charles would eventually set out for Khartoum at 7.45 *am* on the 24th and would arrive at the confluence of the Niles at around noon on the 28th. Khartoum was assaulted on the night 25/26 January. The defences were breached at about 3.00 *am* and Gordon was dead by sunrise. If we imagine for a moment that Wolseley's orders specifically emphasised that not a second should be lost in getting steamers to Khartoum; that such an injunction would have resulted in Wilson setting off at the crack of dawn on the 22nd; but that he would have travelled at the same rate and have been beset by an identical or comparable set of misfortunes; it follows that he would still have arrived some 4-5 hours after Gordon had met his death, some 7-8 hours after the defences had been breached and around 12-15 hours after the Mahdists had begun crossing the White Nile in strength. That there was literally nothing Sir Charles Wilson could have done to avert the fall of Khartoum thus becomes manifest. Moreover, the Wolseley construct also ignores the fact that if it was not the news of Abu Klea which triggered the final assault, then it was the subsequent rendezvous

¹ When eventually he did, he recovered within 48 hours.

² Chapter 4 refers.

between the British and the steamers. These were developments which would have provided precisely the same spur to enemy action, wherever in time and space they were situated. In other words it is demonstrably the case that the near-approach of the British precipitated the demise of an already played out garrison. In order for the assault not to have occurred, and for all the wishful thinking evinced by Wolseley to come true, it would have been necessary for the most recent reports from the Mahdī's spies to have stated that the garrison remained well fed, fit for duty and perfectly capable of repelling boarders. In reality this had not been true since the New Year – which is to say for the past 3½ weeks. Wolseley's insinuations might at least be understandable if Wilson had ordered his exhausted force to take two rest days, before commencing the next phase of operations. Even that eventuality would have been operationally justifiable, given that Wolseley's orders said nothing whatever about rapidity, but that is not, in any case, what Wilson actually did.

7.8.1 Reconnaissance Operations: 22 January

The cavalry patrol tasked with reconnoitring upstream had returned by mid-morning on the 22nd, without detecting any sign of the enemy. The known state of the cavalry ponies and the patrol's short duration would suggest that it had not pushed a full 18 miles to the south. In fact the Faqī Muṣṭafa had halted on meeting a stream of anṣār making their way south after Abu Kru. In all probability he was as worried about the British as they were about him. With no positive contacts to the south, Wilson turned his attention northwards. *Talahawiyeh* and *Bordein* got underway at around noon.¹ Colonel Maḥmūd Bey took it upon himself to tag along at the back with the *Sāfia*.² The smallest vessel, *Tawfīqiyeh*, was nothing like as well protected as the others and remained at anchor. During the course of the afternoon Rhodes commandeered her salon as a hospital room and had General Stewart stretchered aboard.³

As the other three steamers cruised past Metemmeh, they were engaged to little or no effect by riflemen posted in a prominent date-palm grove. The purported enemy concentration lay a short distance downstream, at the village of Sayala (or Sayal).⁴ The settlement was set back from the river and concealed by trees. The lookouts aboard *Talahawiyeh* spotted a gun-position dug into a water-wheel (or *sakieh*) pit, but could detect no other sign of an enemy presence. As a landing-party went ashore to confirm the area clear, Wilson waved *Bordein* on towards Shendy.⁵ Verner disembarked with 50 Sudanese and proceeded to engage the town defences from 800 yards.⁶ In the meantime, Wilson had re-embarked his landing party and was on the move again. Not long after passing another unoccupied gun position, *Talahawiyeh* was hailed by a Shendy loyalist who was taken aboard and questioned about Mahdīst movements. He reported that a fresh wave of reinforcements from the north had halted when they encountered groups of fellow Berberines marching home

¹ Whitaker (ed.), Verner Diary, 64.

² Macdonald, *Too Late*, 300.

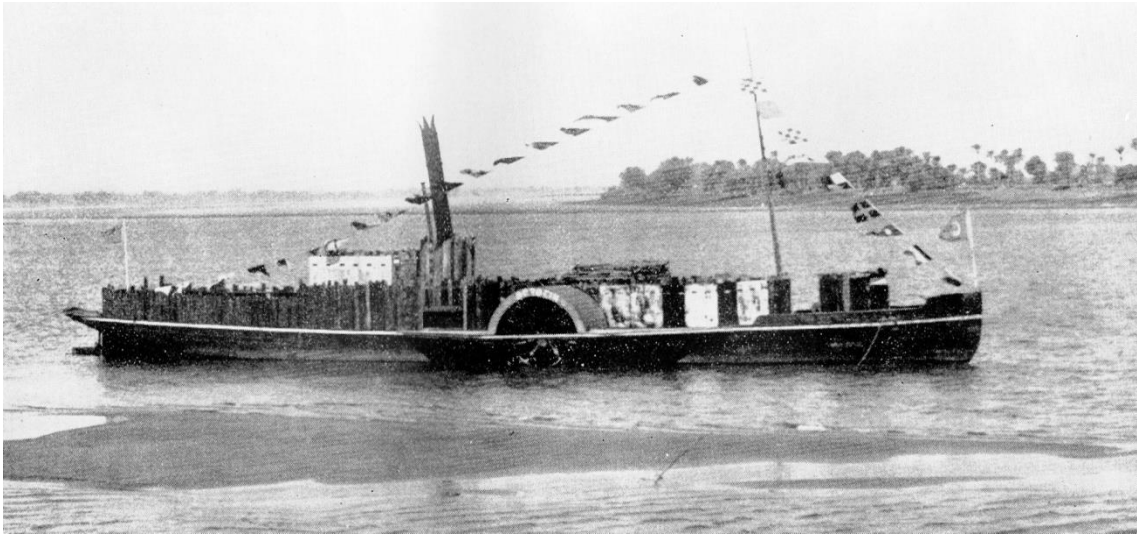
³ Ibid, 302.

⁴ Wilson gives the former, Verner the latter.

⁵ Wilson, *Korti to Khartum*, 117-8.

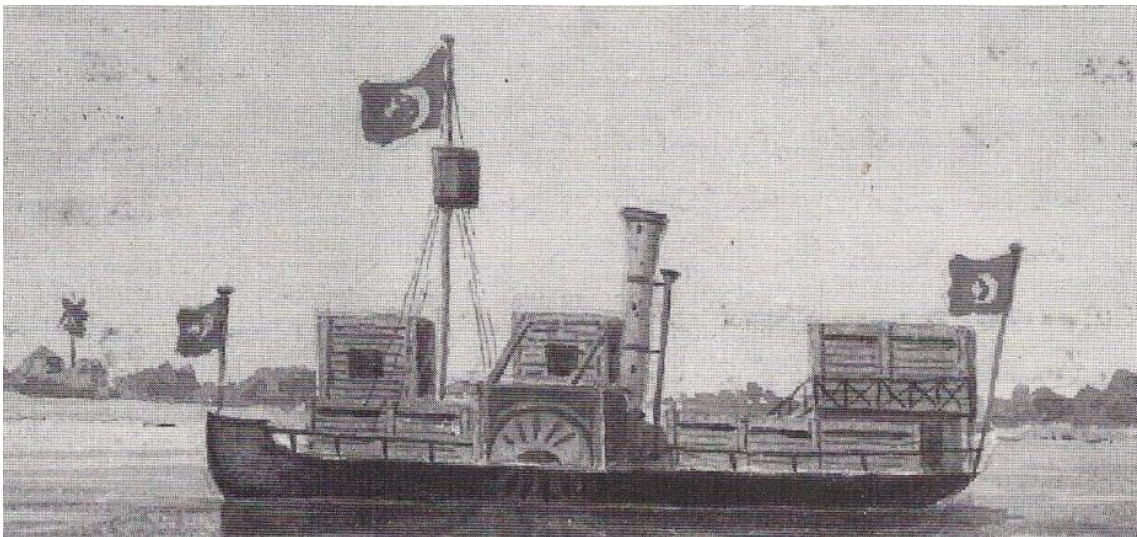
⁶ Whitaker (ed.), Verner Diary, 64.

with their wounded. He went on to state that there was a large loyalist faction in Shendy and not more than 300-400 anṣār.¹ Although it was not to be regarded as



Illustrations 9 & 10: *Bordein*

Bordein was re-floated by the Mahdists, recaptured during Kitchener's re-conquest and is presently dry-docked in North Khartoum. Above she is seen moored in front of the sarāya on the 50th Anniversary of Gordon's death. Below is a watercolour painted by Trafford showing her improvised defences in 1885. [Image Sources: (Top) Sandes, *RE in Egypt and Sudan*; (Bottom) West Sussex Records Office, Trafford MS.]



authoritative intelligence, this was precisely the sort of information that Wilson was seeking. Verner re-embarked his troops when *Talahawiyeh* and *Sāfia* came steaming past his position, firing on Shendy as they went. It was as well that he acted promptly, as a significant body of Mahdist cavalry under the Amīr Wad Hamza now came riding towards Shendy from the south. Wilson was told, probably by *Khaṣhm* al-Mūs, that

¹ Wilson, *Korti to Khartum*, 118.

these were the same riders who had been upstream watching the steamers for some little time.

Not far downstream of Shendy *Talahawiyeh* stopped to take another *Shā'iqī* on board. His responses corresponded with the earlier interrogation, enabling Wilson to conclude, 'it was now therefore certain that we had nothing to fear from any force advancing from the north, at any rate for several days.'¹ His task for the day accomplished, he ordered the steamers put about. The flotilla stopped engines abreast of Shendy, this time to pummel the town with small-arms fire and a barrage of ten rounds from each of the six guns. When at length they resumed the homeward journey, the steamers made only slow progress against the current, which did not augur well for the passage to Khartoum. The day closed with a short-lived fight between the steamers and several boatloads of anṣār, who had landed on Gubat Island to attack the party of Egyptians deployed there as an outlying picket. It was dark by the time the flotilla dropped anchor beside *Tawfīqiyeh*. Before going ashore Wilson gave orders that *Bordein* and *Talahawiyeh* should be readied for a dash upriver, to commence as early as possible the following day. It was generally anticipated that the necessity to sort out the crews would probably mean getting underway at about noon.

Much good work had been done on the defences in the absence of the steamers. A triangular fort overlooking 'Gubat' had been completed and was now ringed by GCR rifle-pits. Within a day or so the position had become known as the 'Guards Fort'.² Down on the Nile, where most of the force was bivouacked between the high-water riverbank and the water's edge, work-parties had been busily throwing up earthworks. This main defensive position would be designated the 'River Fort'. By the time the steamers returned, there was already a strong defensive parapet, of about 140 yards in length, running along the edge of the cultivated flood plain, about 20 yards from the riverbank. The excavation for the parapet had created a ditch about 12 feet wide and 8 feet deep, in front of which there was a strong thorn zariba and a low wire entanglement. The horse-lines of the 19th Hussars were outside the eastern face of the perimeter, where an old *sakieh* mound was being converted into a redoubt,³ a position which later became known as the 'Hussar Fort'.⁴ For the time being, crude shelters with dhura-stalk roofs had been erected over the wounded, although Surgeon-Major Ferguson would later pronounce them unhealthy and have them replaced with hospital-sheet awnings.⁵ Ferguson had been keeping a careful tally of casualties and calculated that in the fighting to date the column had suffered 101 fatalities and 167 wounded.⁶

On disembarking, Wilson learned that Pigott had still not made a start. Although he had circumvented the poor condition of the animals by buying a reputedly fast, strong camel from Melton Prior, for a princely £35,⁷ he had again been thwarted when his native guides declared themselves too frightened to start with so small a

¹ Ibid, 120.

² Whitaker (ed.), Verner Diary, 67.

³ Verner, *Sketches in the Soudan*.

⁴ Burleigh, *Daily Telegraph* report, quoted in the *Bristol Mercury and Evening Post*, 12 Feb. 85.

⁵ Whitaker (ed.), Verner Diary, 75.

⁶ Macdonald, *Too Late*, 299.

⁷ Prior, *Campaigns*, 224.

party, in such close proximity to the enemy. It was decided that Pigott should go out the following evening, when Colonel Talbot was due to set off for Jakdul with a convoy of 900 baggage-camels and a 400-man escort.¹ It was anticipated that Pigott and his party would accompany Talbot as far as the outpost at Abu Klea and hasten ahead from there.² Orders were also given in preparation for the coming river dash. Sir Charles and Captain Fred Gascoigne, the late Colonel Burnaby's travelling companion, would travel aboard the *Bordein*, said to be fastest and most manoeuvrable vessel, in company with Khashm al-Mūs Bey. Lieutenant Edward Stuart-Wortley would travel aboard the *Talahawiyeh* with 'Abd al-Ḥamīd Bey. Gordon had confided in his journals that he thought highly of both Khashm al-Mūs and 'Abd al-Ḥamīd. Evidently the latter had been pushed on quickly by Gordon, but Wilson deemed him too young to hold such exalted rank: 'He had the petulant manners of a spoiled child, amusing to watch, but annoying when work has to be done.'³ In the event, Wilson was proved right and Gordon wrong; the youthful *Bey* would desert on the return journey, abandoning not only the men under his command, but also a devoted slave-girl who had doted on him.

Originally it had been intended that 50 British soldiers would go aboard the steamers, but as Talbot would shortly be taking 400 men away, leaving Boscawen with barely 600 bayonets, Wilson decided to reduce his escort to 1 officer and 20 men.⁴ It is not inconceivable that he did so in order to minimise the loss of life in the event of disaster. Sir Charles was under orders to bring the soldiers back from Khartoum, but to leave three officers behind to assist Gordon, until such time as Wolseley could effect the relief of city. Gascoigne and Stuart-Wortley were two of the nominations, but the third, Major John Dickson, had been wounded at Abu Klea. Having read Gordon's journals and gained a sense of the dire situation which must now be prevailing at Khartoum, Wilson chose not to nominate a replacement. Some of the newspapermen, including certainly Burleigh and Prior, requested permission to tag along, but Wolseley appears to have anticipated this and had specified that such requests were not to be accommodated.

7.8.2 The Second Day

Friday 23 January began with great bustle and the best of intentions. Verner, Stuart-Wortley and Gascoigne were faced with the difficult task of sifting out the Egyptian 'hens' from the Shā'iqiā Arabs. It was not only a matter of getting all the Egyptians off *Bordein* and *Talahawiyeh*, but of then transferring eligible Sudanese from *Sāfia* and *Tawfiqiyeh* in their stead. Everybody had his particular spot in the darkness of the hold, where he slept and kept a precious pile of possessions. Nor was it easy to work out who did what; who was a boiler-man and who was a gunner. Amidst all the toing and froing, the Naval Brigade artificers did their best to service the boilers. By now Beresford was laid up in hospital. He offered to accompany the steamers even so, but the doctors forbade it. A great deal of time was lost by the necessity to transact

¹ War-diary entry 23 Jan 85.

² Wilson, *Korti to Khartum*, 123.

³ Ibid, 142.

⁴ Ibid, 127.

queries through interpreters, as the only officer with any Arabic was Stuart-Wortley. The chaos aboard the boats was further compounded by the presence of a significant number of women; wives, concubines and slave-girls, who, amongst other things, attended to the on-board catering. In the event, about 25 women, including some with babes and infants, hid or otherwise inveigled themselves aboard *Bordein* and *Talahawiyeh*. Verner recalled the events of that morning thus:

General Gordon sent us very urgent instructions on no account to send up any Egyptians, but to select a crew of his Soudanese soldiers. This operation, simple as it sounds, was a work of untold agony and worry and nearly sent Gascoigne, Stuart- Wortley and myself out of our minds. Every Egyptian and Soudanese had some belongings in the shape of a woman slave or goat or boxes of loot or figs or dried meat. The confusion and fights arising out of the shifting of some 400 of these men from the four steamers and selecting some 250 of them to man two, was simply indescribable.¹

In the meantime Wilson, Boscawen and Barrow had come together to refine their plans. One of the first decisions to emerge was that Trafford would command the Royal Sussex party. He was told to nominate the 20 best shots in his company and, in accordance with Wolseley's very particular order, to parade his men in red. Try as they might, Trafford and Colour-Sergeant Wellstead were unable to locate the undress frocks brought up by Burnaby's convoy; in all probability they had been lost during the night-march. Trafford was obliged to return to the headquarters and report his difficulty. COs GCR and HCR knew that their own men had their red serge in their saddle-bags and, anxious to further the glory of their own regiments, now tried to supplant the Royal Sussex. Percy Barrow was having none of it and spoke up for Trafford. Later that afternoon, Trafford's party was provided with a mixed assortment of Guards and heavy cavalry frocks. Although some secondary sources talk of there being red-coated men aboard the steamers as a matter of fact, this would appear to be nothing more than an assumption. The point was to march a detachment through the streets of Khartoum in red, not to cruise upriver in it. At no point in the participant accounts of Wilson, Trafford or Gascoigne is there a reference which confirms that the Royal Sussex were actually clad in red. Even more compellingly Sir George Arthur's *The Story of the Household Cavalry*, (London, 1909), quotes a letter from Stuart-Wortley which asserts that it was not worn.² As it turned out, Trafford and his men had to camp beside the steamers, for so prolonged were the practical difficulties of reorganizing the crews, servicing the engines and gathering in enough firewood for the boilers that, in the end, Wilson was obliged to defer his departure until morning.

¹ Whitaker (ed.), Verner Diary, 65.

² Arthur, *Household Cavalry*, ii, 691: "'Twenty men of the Royal Sussex came up to Khartoum with us on the two steamers. Their red tunics had been sent up specially for them to wear on arrival at Khartoum, in order that the Khalifa's [sic – Mahdi's] men should realise the British had arrived. They did not wear their red tunics on the way up the river from Metemmeh – and as far as I can recollect – the tunics went to the bottom of the Nile when the steamers were wrecked coming down from Khartoum.' (Letter from Brig-Gen. the Hon. E. Stuart-Wortley, Jan. 19 1909).'"

7.9 THE RIVER DASH

Quite what misfortunes befell the *Bordein* and *Talahawiyeh* on their difficult four-day journey upriver are too well known to require recitation here. Equally the disastrous return journey in which both vessels foundered, stranding Wilson's force 40 miles south of Gubat, is the mainstay of *From Korti to Khartum*. That the events of that week would have tested the character and resolve of the best officers in the service is beyond cavil. And yet Sir Charles Wilson did not merely get to Khartoum but, with the exception of a handful of fatal casualties, and a hapless babe-in-arms inexplicably cast into the Nile by a Sudanese soldier as *Bordein* foundered, also brought his command back to Gubat substantially intact. There remains one last accusation requiring investigation, namely that the steamers did not press far enough upriver to be certain that Khartoum had fallen.

7.10 KHARTOUM IN SIGHT

According to Wolseley, it was on the morning of Wednesday 28 January that the 'Gordon Relief Expedition' reached Khartoum, not that any of the officers present that day would have considered their tiny, isolated and violently assailed force to be synonymous with any wider expedition. The 'relief' of the city was not, in the end, to be conducted by 10,000 men, by three British brigades, but rather by Colonel Sir Charles Wilson, his batman, two other intelligence officers, 21 members of the Royal Sussex Regiment, three members of the Royal Navy, 250 semi-wild *bazingers* and *bāshī-būzuqs* and four antiquated brass cannon. Wolseley's later insinuations would have it that this was the event which, had it been enacted two days earlier, would have caused Muḥammad Aḥmad and a huge rebel host to throw up their hands in despair and march quietly home to Kordofan.

It was around 6.00 *am* when *Bordein* and her consort set off on the final leg of the journey. There were more and more sniping incidents, of increasing severity, as the morning wore on. By about 11.00 *am*, the officers could identify Tuti Island at the confluence of the Niles, beyond which were the indistinct outlines of the Sudanese capital. Opposite the village of Fighailaia¹ (or 'Figeveh'),² the enemy opened a 'regular fusilade' [sic].³ This was the cue for Wilson to take post in the midships 'gun-turret', in reality an improvised wooden fort atop the paddle boxes, where the view was excellent and he would be able to shout instructions both to the wheelhouse and to the engine room below. With him were Gascoigne, *Khashm* al-Mūs and Muḥammad Ibrahim, his interpreter. In anticipation of what was to come, the veteran Shā'iqī colonel sat down in a corner. Also present was a brass howitzer, a crew of black Sudanese gunners and an Egyptian artillery officer called 'Abd Allāh Effendi. Just behind the turret, down at deck level, nine Royal Sussex soldiers were peering through their firing ports, waiting for Colour Sergeant Wellstead to give them their first fire-control order.

¹ Wilson, *Korti to Khartum*, 169.

² Gascoigne, *To Within a Mile*, 93.

³ Wilson, *Korti to Khartum*, 169.

According to Trafford, *Talahawiyeh* was about 50 yards ahead of *Bordein* as they drew near the east-bank village of Ḥalfaiya, once held by the Shā'iqiā as Gordon's northernmost outpost. Wilson noted that the palm-groves had been burned and the houses wrecked. There were also a number of large boats moored in front of the village. *Khashm* al-Mūs was asked what he thought this meant and replied, 'Gordon's troops must be there as the Mahdī has no boats.' He was disabused of the notion when *Talahawiyeh* came under a heavy port-side fire, from four guns and countless rifles. The engagement began at 800 yards and shortened as the steamers passed a *sakieh* pit housing the first enemy gun. Trafford wrote that the riverbank was, 'white with musketry', but that in accordance with Wilson's orders he and his men concentrated their fire on the gun embrasures. One shell burst in the river only yards from *Talahawiyeh*, throwing shards of shrapnel and a plume of water into the fortified deck-space occupied by the Royal Sussex. Nobody was hurt but the burning fuse clattered onto the deck with the shrapnel, to be quickly thrown overboard by Drummer Gilbert. *Bordein* now took the lead and engaged a pair of guns emplaced further along the riverbank.¹

Thus began one of the most iconic episodes of British military history, an affair which cannot be more authoritatively recounted than in the words of Sir Charles Wilson himself. His account contains nothing which is incompatible with Gascoigne or Trafford:

The guns were well placed, one in a sakieh pit, two in a little battery above, and one in the village. The bullets began to fly pretty thickly, tapping like hail against the ship's sides, whilst the shells went screeching overhead or threw up jets of water in the stream round us. Our men replied cheerily, and the gun in the turret was capitally served by the black gunners under their captain Abdullah Effendi, who laid the gun each time and fired it himself. The gunners who had nothing on but a cloth round their waists, looked more like demons than men in the thick smoke; and one huge savage was the very incarnation of savagery drunk with war. The shooting was fairly good, and we heard afterwards that we had dismounted one of the guns in the battery; but at the time we could not see the effect. After we had run the gauntlet and the fire was turned on our consort, the Sudanese sent up a wild cry of delight, raising their rifles in their hands and shaking them in the air. It was a strange weird sight, these black savages with their blood up, quivering with excitement.

I now had the leisure to watch the 'Talahawiyeh' coming through the thick of it, scathless as we had done, the red flag streaming bravely above the smoke, which hung in a dense cloud around her. The firing now ceased for a few minutes, and we could see the large Government House in Khartum [sic] plainly above the trees. Khashm was very anxious to know whether we could see the Egyptian flag, which he said Gordon always kept flying, but neither Gascoigne nor I could see a trace of one anywhere. Khashm now began to get anxious, and said he felt certain something must have happened at Khartum, and that the place must be in the Mahdi's hands, otherwise there would have been no

¹ Trafford MS.

boats at Halfiyeh, and the flag would be flying. I could not believe this; at any rate, we could not stop now until we were certain all was over.¹

We had only a short respite, for, directly after passing Shamba [a village located to starboard], two guns on the right bank opened upon us, with a heavy rifle fire from both banks, and this was kept up until we came within range of the guns at Omdurman. When about half-way up Tuti I thought for a moment that the island was still in Gordon's hands. A sort of dike [sic] ran along the edge of the island, and behind this there was a long line of men firing away as hard as they could. I heard the bullets singing overhead, and saw them strike the sand amongst the enemy's sharpshooters on the opposite bank, and thought they were helping us. I then ordered the steamer to run in close to the bank, stop, cease firing and ask for news. This we did, getting within 60 or 70 yards. I felt so persuaded at first that they were Gordon's men that I got outside the turret, but the only reply to our shouts was a sharper and better directed fire, which soon drove me inside again.

It was clear that the enemy's riflemen were on Tuti; but Khartum might still be holding out – so after a delay of about a quarter of an hour we went on, old Khashm protesting that it was all up, and predicting terrible disaster to ourselves. No sooner did we start upwards than we got into such a fire as I hope never to pass through again in a 'penny steamer'. Two or more guns opened upon us from Omdurman fort, and three or four from Khartum or the upper end of Tuti; the roll of musketry from each side was continuous; and high above that could be heard the grunting of a Nordenfeldt or a mitrailleuse, and the loud rushing noise of the Krupp shells...

...We kept on to the junction of the two Niles, when it became plain to everyone that Khartum had fallen into the enemy's hands; for not only were there hundreds of dervishes ranged under their banners, standing on the sand-spit close to the town ready to resist our landing, but no flag was flying in Khartum and not a shot was fired in our assistance; here too, if not before, we should have met the two steamers I knew Gordon still had at Khartum. I at once gave the order to turn and run full speed down the river. It was hopeless to attempt a landing or to communicate with the shore under such a fire.

The sight at this moment was very grand: the masses of the enemy with their fluttering banners near Khartum; the long rows of riflemen in the shelter-trenches at Omdurman; the numerous groups of men on Tuti; the bursting shells, and the water torn up by hundreds of bullets and occasional heavier shot, made an impression never to be forgotten. Looking out over the stormy scene, it seemed almost impossible that we should escape.

Directly we turned round, the Sudanese, who had been wild with excitement, and firing away cheerily, completely collapsed. Poor fellows! They had lost wives, families and all they possessed. Khashm el Mus sank into a corner of the turret with his mantle wrapped round his head, and even the brave gunner-captain forsook his gun. 'What is the use of firing?' he said, 'I have lost all.' For a few minutes we could get nothing out of him; but by dint of

¹ Wilson, Korti to Khartum, 171-2.

persuasion, and I am afraid some swearing – is it not Kinglake who notices this forcible character of Englishmen’s language in action? – we got him at last to fire; and then, the devil once roused, he served his gun steadily until we had run the gauntlet again and were out of range of the guns of Halfiyeh.

As we passed the ‘Talahawiyeh,’ which had been aground off Tuti for a few minutes, we shouted to her to turn and follow; and just at this moment we saw a man on a white camel come down to the edge of the river below Omdurman with a flag of truce. He waved and beckoned to us, but as the firing kept up as briskly as ever, we took no notice of him. Whilst we were off Omdurman the small boat we were towing was struck by a shell, and a fragment of shell went through the funnel, cutting the stay and letting a rush of flame out, which soon set fire to the large wooden block left swinging in the air. I was rather anxious, as the sparks began to fly about, and the deck was littered with open ammunition boxes; but on calling for help, a plucky Sudan soldier jumped up, and after a few minutes managed to get down the flaming bit of wood and throw it overboard. If an Englishman, he would have had the Victoria Cross. He was afterwards shot, just as we were getting out of danger.

We all had narrow escapes. I was struck just above the knee by a spent shot which had got through a weak point in the turret; and my field glass, an old friend of twenty-five years, sent out to me in America, was broken in my hand as I was resting it on top of the turret. Gascoigne was as imperturbable as ever: he is about the coolest man under fire I have ever seen. Muhammed Ibrahim, the interpreter, was invaluable, always keeping the Sudanese up to the mark...and best of all, he did not lose heart when we turned to run down.¹

By the time the steamers were safely outside Halfaiya’s arcs of fire, it was past 4.00 pm. They had been continuously engaged for more than four hours. That neither vessel had been sunk or disabled during the course of such a fight was little short of miraculous, albeit no great testament to Mahdīst gunnery. *Talahawiyeh* had been holed only marginally above the waterline by a shell from Omdurman which, had it not failed to detonate, must have sunk her.² The improvised armour-cladding notwithstanding, two men had been killed and 15 wounded.³ Wilson and his men had successfully gained the confluence of the Niles, notwithstanding having twice run aground in transit and having been left at the mercy of the enemy for extended periods. Refloating the vessels had required both ingenuity and Herculean physical effort, yet still they had persisted in pushing on up a manifestly treacherous waterway. They had engaged the enemy at Halfaiya, Omdurman and on Tuti Island; they had observed a powerful enemy host arrayed beneath their banners on the south bank of the Blue Nile; and they had reached a point where both the *sarāya* and the Catholic cathedral were in plain view. Famously there had been no sign of the Egyptian flag which Gordon always flew over the *sarāya*, but this was by no means the only evidence of his demise. It was also observed that the houses of the well-to-do on

¹ Ibid, 170-178.

² Trafford MS.

³ Gascoigne, *To Within a Mile*, 93.

either side of the *sarāya* had been ‘wrecked and half-destroyed’; and that the armoured barges formerly anchored as floating forts, at either end of the South Front defences, were now tamely moored at Omdurman.¹ At the confluence, the steamers had been caught squarely in a three-way crossfire from Omdurman, Tuti and the city itself. Through it all, not a shot had been fired to help them. The contention that Wilson was in any way uncertain as to the fate of Khartoum when he turned can safely be regarded as risible. Remarkably it would not stop a downcast Wolseley suggesting to London that this was the case. That Wilson and his men had pressed so hard and so far amounted to a collective act of valour worthy of any of the best known sea fights in history. They elected not to turn until their duty had been more than amply fulfilled; until they reached a point where to proceed further would have been tantamount to suicide. How unreasonable, then, that for Wolseley, even this would not be enough.

7.11 IMPACT OF THE STUART-WORTLEY AND PIGOTT REPORTS

The following day, Thursday 29 January, *Talahawiyeh* foundered on striking a partially submerged rock. All hands were saved and transferred to the *Bordein*, or to the dismasted *nuggar* in tow behind the stricken vessel. *Bordein* steamed on with the now over-crowded *nuggar* at her stern. During the course of Thursday evening, Wilson was notified that a messenger from the Mahdī wished to come aboard to deliver a letter. It turned out to be a Dongolāwī known as the Faqī ‘Abd al-Raḥmān, the same man on the white camel who had appeared on the riverbank at Omdurman, under a flag of truce. Wilson remarked that he and his officers, ‘were much struck by his quiet manner, the business-like way in which he performed his mission, and his belief in the righteousness of the Mahdī’s course.’² The missive in his care was specifically addressed to the English and Shā’iqiā officers aboard the steamers and, after several paragraphs of the Mahdī’s habitual theological rhetoric, went on to demand that the latter change sides and that the former surrender and turn apostate.³ Wilson felt no compunction to reply, but was ushered aside by *Khashm* al-Mūs who urged that he be allowed to send an ostensibly secret response. He would say that it would not be safe to give himself up until such time as he was in possession of a safe-conduct issued under the Mahdī’s personal seal, but that if such a thing could be sent to him he would deliver the *infidels* into the hands of the Faqī Muṣṭafa at Wad Habeshi. This might buy the time to run through the Sabalūka Gorge and the Sixth Cataract and perhaps even bluff their way into the channel at Wad Habeshi, where a Mahdīst battery, now certain to be manned, commanded a narrow safe-lane through the sandbank. During the course of the conversation, ‘Abd al-Raḥmān lied about the fate of Gordon, stating that he was now a prisoner of the Mahdī. Wilson did not believe it, but knew that even if it were true, there was nothing whatever he could do about it. He approved *Khashm*’s subterfuge which seems to have worked admirably, up to the point, just short of Wad Habeshi, at which *Bordein* in her turn also foundered.

¹ Ibid.

² Wilson, *Korti to Khartum*, 189.

³ The letter appears as an appendix to *From Korti to Khartum*.

There was a significant Shā'iqiā presence in the settlements lying to the north of Khartoum and from time to time Wilson had invited known loyalists aboard *Bordein* to question them about events at Khartoum. One party spoke of how Faraj Pasha, one of Gordon's generals, had thrown open the Masallamīya Gate to admit the enemy. This was the origin of the story that Khartoum had fallen through treachery, the story so eagerly embraced by Gladstone and Wolseley. It was Friday evening, the day before *Bordein* foundered, that another pair of Shā'iqiā visitors came aboard and told a tale which, like the treachery of Faraj Pasha, was no more than 'native rumour', but would nonetheless be incorporated into Stuart-Wortley's report of two days later. This time it was to the effect that Gordon had holed up in the Catholic cathedral with 50 Greeks, including the consul, Nicolla Leontides, and a party of Shā'iqiā *bāshi-būzuqs*.¹ While it was known that Gordon had been using the stone-built church as his magazine, Wilson did not judge the story to be credible. Unfortunately Stuart-Wortley would fail to articulate his chief's scepticism.

Wilson and Stuart-Wortley came to be separated in the aftermath of *Bordein's* loss, when the latter was told to put four British and eight Sudanese soldiers into a rowing boat and slip past Wad Habeshi under the cover of darkness. His mission was to raise the alarm at Gubat and get Beresford sent out to effect a rescue, with one of the remaining steamers. Though spotted and fired on, Stuart-Wortley and his men pulled clear of danger. By rowing hard and riding a favourable current, they completed a 40-mile journey in less than eight hours, arriving at the 'River Fort' at 3.00 *am* on Sunday 1 February. Stuart-Wortley went at once to find Boscawen. As he called out in the dark, he woke Douglas Dawson, now acting as the colonel's ADC. 'I jumped up and went out to see who it was, and then made out to my surprise Stuart-Wortley, whom we all thought at Khartoum. I looked towards the river, expecting in the faint light to see the steamers, then seeing nothing, and observing by his face that there was something wrong, I said, "Why good heavens! Where are the steamers, what is the news?" He said, "The very worst."'² Boscawen had been laid low by fever, so Dawson woke Percy Barrow, now acting as his chief of staff. Barrow heard Stuart-Wortley out and then pondered the implications of his news with the stricken Boscawen and the rest of the staff. The first priority had to be the rescue of Sir Charles Wilson and his party from Mernat Island. They inferred that the fall of Khartoum implied a strong likelihood of the Mahdī bringing his host downriver to attack the lodgement. Boscawen was in no fit state to remain in command, so it was agreed that the next senior lieutenant colonel, Mildmay Willson, should take over. By the time the consultation was complete, it was just about light, at which point Stuart-Wortley was sent aboard *Sāfia* to brief Beresford.

While Beresford was making his preparations, Stuart-Wortley sat down to write a long report on the events of the past few days, which he had been told was to go out with a convoy leaving for Jakdul Wells that night.³ It is unsurprising, given how tired he

¹ Stuart-Wortley's report dated 1 Feb. 85; see the *London Gazette*, 10 Mar. 85, 1028.

² Dawson, *Stewart's Desert March*, 739.

³ Stuart-Wortley's report dated 1 Feb. 85; see the *London Gazette*, 10 Mar. 85, 1026-8.

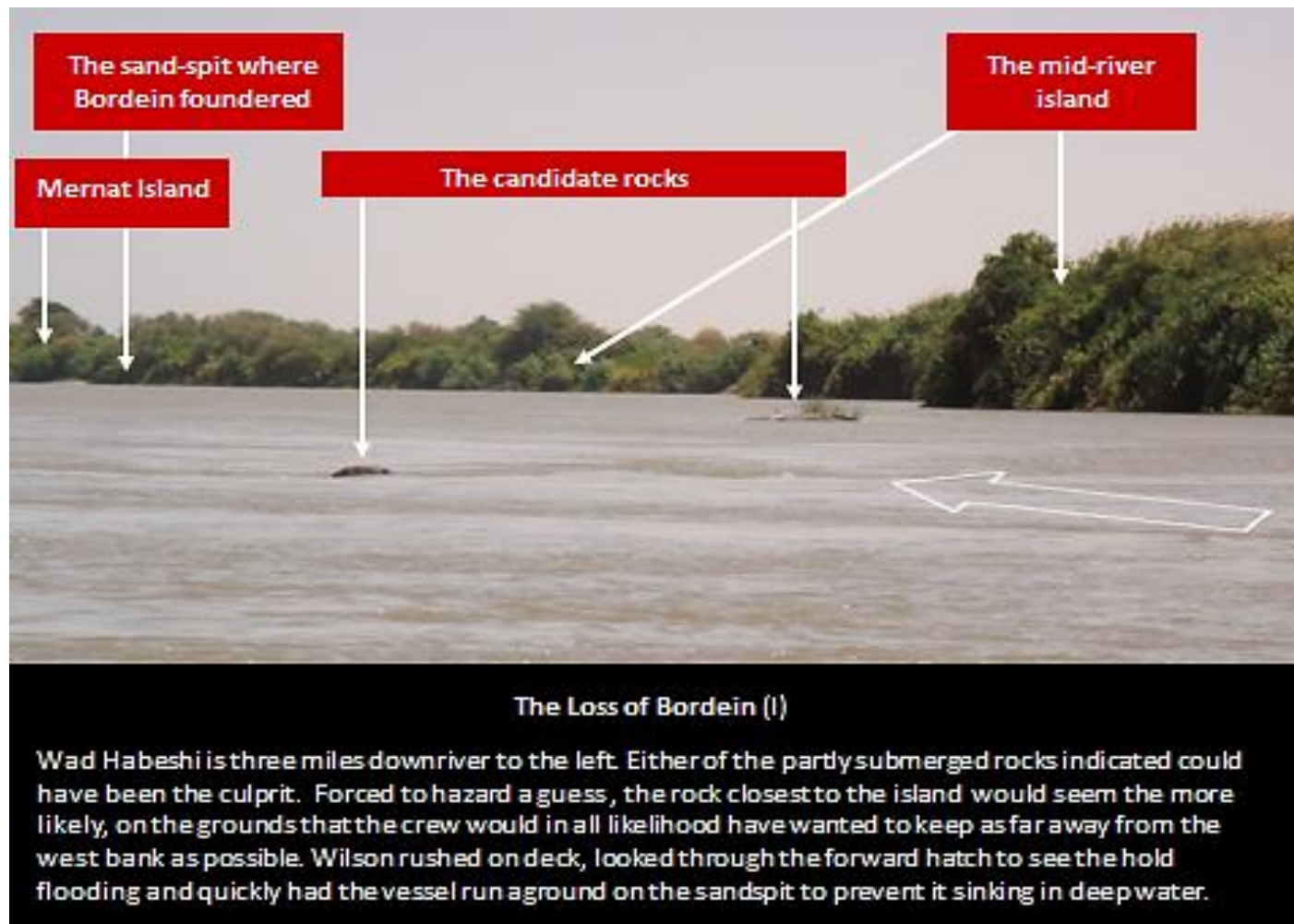
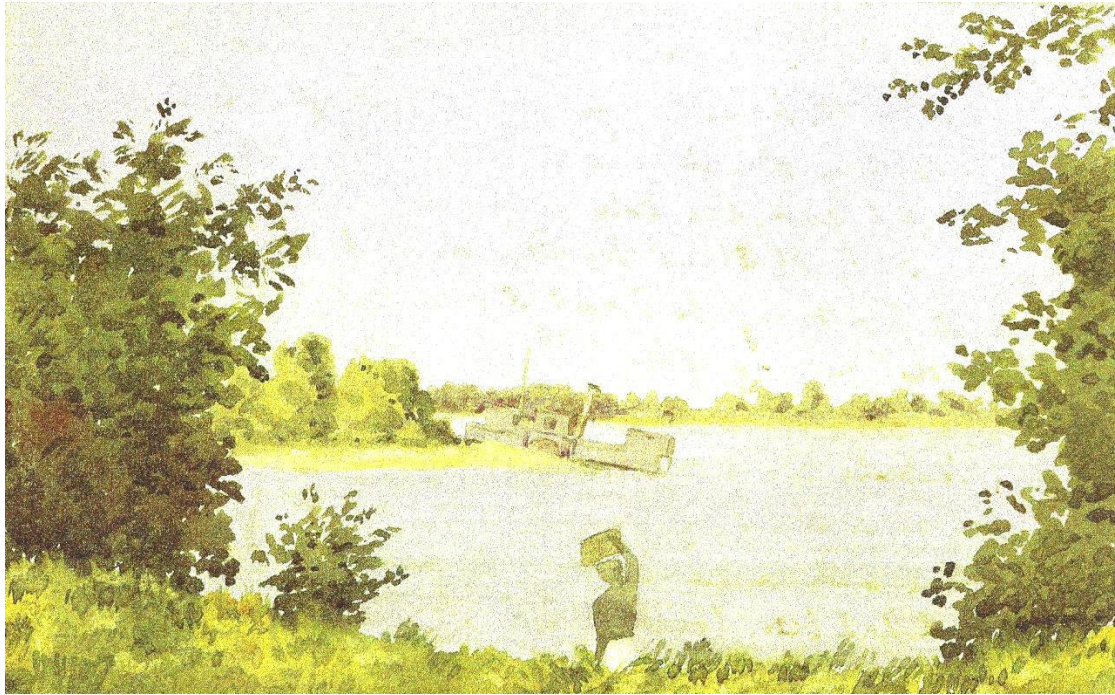


Illustration 11: Where Bordein Foundered I [Image Source: Fieldwork Phase, 2009.]



The point at which Wilson had Bordein run onto the sand-spit. The direction of travel was from right to left, while the offending rock is about 400 yards upstream (to the right). The river is much higher in the photograph than was the case in January 1885. Note that a new channel has been carved between the old north tip of Mernat and the rest of the island.

Illustration 12: Where Bordein Foundered II [Image Source: Fieldwork Phase, 2009.]



Illustrations 13 & 14: Utility of visual sources (I & II)

Historic visual sources can be of great assistance in identifying precise locations in the field. The watercolour above was painted by Captain Lionel Trafford, who was aboard *Bordein* when she foundered. [Image Sources: (above) West Sussex Records Office, Trafford MS; (below) Fieldwork Phase.]





Illustration 15: Utility of Visual Sources (III)

This scene appeared in the *Illustrated London News* on Saturday 14 March 1885. Although many historians are inclined to assume that the artwork in the illustrated papers is fanciful, much of it, as this picture demonstrates, was drawn from life (compare with Illustration 14). War-artists like Prior treated their sketches with the same urgency as Burleigh and Cameron treated their reporting. Sketches were rushed back to editors in the military mail, or by means of special couriers. On their arrival in London they were placed in the hands of jobbing artists, who rendered the originals into finished works fit for publication. This scene started life as a sketch drawn by Sir Charles Wilson. What has been lost at the hands of the London artist is the shape of the Bordein's superstructure (see Illustration 9). [Image Source: Snook Collection.]

must have been, that he failed to get the tone quite right. He was also under pressure of time, as he was determined to go back upriver with Beresford to rescue his comrades. The principal problem was his first paragraph, where he set far too much store by unverified native rumour. The report began well, with an undoubted fact, flowed into a perfectly reasonable assessment, but then deployed uncorroborated

hearsay much too prominently. Even worse was that it did so in respect of a mission-critical point of detail.

*The fall of Khartoum is without doubt. The fate of General Gordon is doubtful as reports are conflicting, but the general opinion is that he was killed; yet there is no preponderance of evidence one way or the other. He is either killed or besieged in the church at Khartoum.*¹

The unfortunately chosen words in the last sentence, together with remarks about the purported treachery of Faraj Pasha, would pass through the hands of the army commander and be rapidly relayed to London. To a judgemental mind like Wolseley's, it was all but inevitable that Stuart-Wortley's first paragraph would be interpreted to mean that the steamers had failed to press far enough upriver to be sure of the situation inside the city. It is to some extent remarkable that Stuart-Wortley could write in such terms, several days after the enemy was known to have broken into the city, because even if Gordon *had* managed to make a stand in the cathedral, military common-sense would dictate that an enemy equipped with Krupp artillery pieces would have reduced such a position within hours. In fairness to Stuart-Wortley, he was not an experienced intelligence officer, intended no harm by these words and was mentally exhausted when he committed them to paper. If the notion that Gordon could still be fighting on, the best part of a week after the enemy break-in, was close to preposterous, there was certainly a much stronger possibility that he had been taken alive as the mendacious faqī had claimed.

By the time Wolseley received Stuart-Wortley's report, he had already sneered at the letter sent by Wilson to Swaine in the aftermath of Abu Klea and, in addition, had enjoyed a long talk with Bloody Pigott, who had ridden into Korti in the early hours of Wednesday 28 January.² Pigott had proceeded to fuel Wolseley's scorn by whispering against Wilson's consultative command style and his decision to disengage at Metemmeh. As we have seen, the journal entry composed by Wolseley immediately after this conversation included such remarks as, 'Wilson has proved a great failure as a soldier....On 21st instant Wilson made a foolish reconnaissance of Matammeh [sic]....a line of conduct that of course has encouraged enemy [sic]...During this silly operation...' and so on. Thus the first few lines of Stuart-Wortley's report would do Sir Charles no favours in the eyes of a man already pre-disposed both to belittle and underestimate him. Instead they served merely to reinforce Wolseley's prejudice.

The worst of Pigott's news was of Stewart's demise. Wolseley responded to the development by summoning Wood forward to act as his chief of staff and sending Buller to assume command of the Desert Column. Travelling in Buller's entourage was Kitchener, who had been present at Korti as the news trickled in from the front. Following Beresford's dramatic fight at Wad Habeshi,³ Wilson had returned to Gubat aboard *Sāfia* on Wednesday 4 February. In accordance with his orders, he left for Korti

¹ Ibid, 1026.

² Wolseley, journal entry 28 Jan; Preston (ed.), *Relief of Gordon*, 127.

³ Beresford *Memoirs*, ii, 295-311

at 1.30 *am* on Friday. He reached Jakdul Wells late on Saturday afternoon, to find that Buller and Kitchener had been there since Monday evening, and had known of the fall of Khartoum since Tuesday. The following morning, Sunday 8 February, Buller and Kitchener left for Abu Klea, in company with Talbot's returning convoy, while Wilson set off in the opposite direction for Korti. He would arrive at Wolseley's headquarters on the evening of the ninth, having covered 174 miles in four days.¹ Two days later some kind soul showed the tired and dejected head of intelligence a telegram from Hartington which instructed Wolseley to, 'Express warm recognition of Government of brilliant services of Sir C. Wilson, and satisfaction at rescue of his party.'²

7.12 THE BRITISH WITHDRAWAL

Later the same day Buller marched into Gubat at the head of six companies of 1st Royal Irish (15 officers & 468 NCOs and men)³ and Talbot's convoy escort, six Camel Corps companies mounted on played-out animals. The arrival of a renowned fighting general did much to revitalise the flagging morale of the force. Buller brought with him the news that the Queen had been graciously pleased to approve Sir Herbert Stewart's immediate promotion to major general.⁴ Kitchener set up camp with Verner and confided that Wilson's failure to capture Metemmeh had attracted a great deal of criticism amongst the headquarters staff. Buller, he added, was absolutely determined to storm the town without delay. Of course Kitchener was reflecting the ill-informed backstabbing which had occurred after Pigott had given vent to his opinions. The following morning, Buller sent for Verner and questioned him about the garrison and defences of Metemmeh. Verner recorded in his diary that, 'He appeared to think it would be a very ordinary affair to capture the place. Of this I have my own opinion but did not give it as I was not asked.'⁵ Before the day was out the new GOC had acquired a more sophisticated understanding of the situation. Probably the most telling conversation he had was with Beresford, who Buller both liked and admired. Beresford recorded the gist of the conversation in his memoirs: 'At his request I stated to him my view of the situation; which was, briefly, that unless we departed swiftly, we should be eaten up by the enemy, who were known to be advancing in immense force.'⁶ There was no further talk about storming Metemmeh. Buller's every effort would now be concentrated on getting the Desert Column out of the desperate position in which he found it. Fortunately he was a fine brigade commander and was able to pull off a fraught retreat without serious mishap.

¹ Wilson, *Korti to Khartum*, 266-270; Colvile, OH, ii, 53.

² Hartington to Wolseley, 11 Feb. 85, quoted in Watson *Life of Wilson*, 334; Wilson, *Korti to Khartum*, 275.

³ War-diary entry 11 Feb. 85.

⁴ Wolseley had specifically asked Hartington to arrange the promotion with the Queen and C-in-C.

⁵ Whitaker (ed.), Verner Diary, 79.

⁶ Beresford, *Memoirs*, ii, 318.

7.13 LEAD INTO CHAPTER 8

Few military failures are attributable to only one factor, to a single decision or to the deeds of one man. Neither is there much point in agonising over military failure if the mission had always been unachievable. The next chapter, Analysis and Interpretation, will dissect the campaign in order to demonstrate that the salvation of Khartoum was not unachievable, but rather had been rendered so: in the first instance by the adoption of a course of action which, by the time it was enacted, was no longer tenable in time and space; and secondly, by poor Campaign Management, which, had it been of a much higher order, could have tipped the balance in favour of success. The chapter will also explore the military viability of the alternate course of action and will close with reflections on culpability.

Chapter 8

ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

8.1 PRELIMINARY REMARKS

For all that the endeavour was compelled by public opinion and offended national pride, the British government did, in the end, authorise a determined attempt to save Khartoum. Failure came as a shock and inevitably led to party-political squabbling in the House of Commons. The concurrent bickering across the military domain might have been averted altogether had Wolseley simply thrown up his hands, offered the plain and honest justification 'we tried' and left it at that. Implicit in this, however, would have been a recognition that in the 'Battle of the Routes' he had come down on the wrong side. This would have required the sort of humility of which Wolseley the great man, now at the height of his renown, was no longer capable. On 6 March 1885, he incorporated the following line in a letter to Hartington, 'I take this opportunity of congratulating Her Majesty's Government upon having adopted the Nile route as the line of advance for this force on Khartum.' These words were written some 40 days after Gordon's death. They make it plain that failure did not generate humility; indeed that it did not elicit so much as a hint of regret. Rather Wolseley's intuitive response to failure was bombast. The theory of 'cognitive dissonance' post-dates the Victorian era, but of course its existence as a psychological phenomenon does not. Unable to come to terms with notions of personal fallibility, Wolseley's sub-conscious began distorting, obfuscating and misinterpreting the failure on the Nile, until he was no longer capable of grasping that by impugning the conduct of a substantially innocent subordinate, he had begun to behave disreputably.

The vehemence of Wolseley's denunciation of Wilson in the privacy of his journal suggests that his views were genuinely delusional. This may have been a function of stress and the 'loneliness of command', but must nonetheless exert a bearing on any assessment of his personal attributes and his quality as a general-officer. That his journal also contains harsh personal attacks on the personalities and professional competence of Wood, Buller, Butler and Brackenbury, who were no mean soldiers, serves to illustrate just how far his ego had run out of control by this point in his life. Also on the receiving end of his scorn were the Prime Minister, the Duke of Cambridge, Admiral Lord John Hay, the Royal Navy generally, Lieutenant General Sir Frederick Stephenson, the heir to the throne and the Queen Empress herself.

This final episode in the story of the Wolseley Ring, in effect its decline and fall, makes it plain that the so-called 'personal' style of command, in which the army commander is the only man empowered to take significant decisions, is not amenable to large scale or geographically dispersed operations. By 1885 the future face of war had already been signposted by the Von Moltke school, which had demonstrated that complex modern operations would require the sort of systematic approach and second order thinking which can only be conveyed by a structured general staff system and a

decentralised command philosophy. For the present, the British remained behind the power curve of military modernity on land, and would not be cured of the malaise until the low cunning of Botha and Smuts finally drew a line under the old ways. Before moving on to address the viability of alternate courses of action, we should reprise the essence of Wolseley's campaign plan and consider what would have happened had Khartoum not fallen when it did.

8.2 HOW WAS WOLSELEY'S CAMPAIGN PLAN MEANT TO CONCLUDE?

At the outset Wolseley's plan had the appearance of being a great monolithic scheme but, as time wore on, events started to run away from him, forcing him to adapt his scheme of manoeuvre to changed circumstance. The necessity to adapt was driven primarily by two things: in the first instance, logistic delays, bottlenecks and the resultant erosion of time; and, as events moved towards a climax, Gordon's projection of how long he would be able hold out. This was coupled with an intimation that the power of the enemy was no longer to be sneezed at. There is no single compelling source from which we can derive a clear understanding of how the final stage of the campaign was meant to play itself out. That this should be so is a measure of just how far removed in time and space Wolseley was from attaining the primary Campaign Objective when Khartoum fell. To piece things together, we are forced to rely on passing references in such sources as Colvile's history and Wolseley's journal. It is to Hartington's credit that what we would now term the National Strategic Aim and the Desired Outcome were well articulated and properly framed by the imposition of constraints. It had been made quite clear to Wolseley that HMG would not countenance an extended occupation of central Sudan. Nor was there any stomach for sallying forth from the confluence of the Niles, to vanquish fundamentalism and so restore a modicum of order to the region. Such ambitions formed no part of the plan and, with Khartoum at the end of its tether, a burden rather than a base of operations, were logistically impracticable in any case. Thus the only legitimate Campaign Objective Wolseley should have been able to derive from his higher direction was along the lines of 'Relieve Khartoum with all necessary urgency and evacuate to Egypt the governor-general, the garrison, all non-Sudanese nationals and their respective dependents.'

It would be useful to reprise exactly what we do know about the unfolding of the campaign plan, keeping in mind that it may be overly generous to describe it as 'unfolding' if the more awkward truth is that it had never been tenable in the first place and simply fell apart with the passage of time. Wolseley was not initially inclined, on the basis of the ferocity of the earlier fighting in the Red Sea Littoral, to underestimate the enemy, nor was he a gambler when it came to his career and reputation. Hence he sought to advance on Khartoum with the equivalent of two brigades of infantry and a brigade-sized camel corps, the latter also designed to fight in the infantry role. He intended from the outset to concentrate a minimum of 5,000 men at or near Shendi, before advancing the last 100 miles to Khartoum's salvation.¹ This

¹ See the item of Buller's correspondence quoted at Melville, *Life of Buller*, 208.

concentration of forces would be classified today as a Decisive Condition or 'campaign building-block'.

The original target date for the relief of Khartoum, set by Wolseley in April 1884, was 15 November.¹ HMG having failed to authorise any preparations before August,² he settled subsequently on 31 January as his revised target.³ At no point had Gordon projected that his food stocks would last into the New Year. Wolseley had no basis, therefore, either in known fact or assessed intelligence, for slipping the timeline to the right, but did so anyway. Although he was always attuned to the possibility of having to send a wing of the army across the Bayūda Desert,⁴ his original and preferred conception was that the unified command would follow the Great Bend in the Nile, with the infantry brigades in whalers and the Camel Corps paralleling them on land.⁵ Writing on 7 November, Buller attempted to persuade Wolseley that the campaign had fallen behind schedule and that the best option to save Khartoum was a dash with the Camel Corps from Korti to Metemmeh, followed immediately by a direct overland advance across the last 98 miles.⁶ At this 'early' date Wolseley rejected the proposal. It is worthy of note that current British doctrine observes, 'The test of any commander and the efficiency of his staff is how well they can issue clear, achievable and *above all timely* orders.'⁷ For a further month, Wolseley persisted with his intent to advance around the Great Bend and concentrate 5,000 men on Shendy.⁸ By the time he left Dongola for Korti, on 13 December, he had accepted but not yet promulgated that an overland dash would now be necessary.⁹ To his credit, he was prepared to take the risk and intended taking personal command of a force of only 1,500 men, (albeit in the event it was closer to 2,000).

Everything changed on 31 December, the day after Stewart set out for Jakdul Wells, when authoritative news at last arrived from Khartoum.¹⁰ Gordon's final message conveyed conflicting imperatives: first that the relief column should come quickly, but also that it should not leave enemy-held Berber to its rear. This might have suggested to Wolseley that the enemy was in far greater strength at Berber than was actually the case: the message was oral, but, from what we know of it, does not appear to have specified that this was so.¹¹ In fact Wolseley had a tolerably accurate intelligence picture of the situation at Berber available to him, because every traveller who had passed that way was questioned subsequently by British officers, whether they gained government held-territory around Merowe or at Suakin. It is curious that having already concluded that he could afford to leave Berber to the left flank and rear of the Desert Column, until such time as Earle and the whaler-borne battalions came

¹ Colvile, OH, i, 31.

² Ibid, i, 45.

³ Wolseley to his wife, 13 Sep. 85; see Arthur (ed.), *Wolseley Letters*, 119.

⁴ Colvile, OH, i, 133.

⁵ Melville, *Life of Buller*, 208.

⁶ See Buller's correspondence dated 8 Nov. 85; Ibid, 207.

⁷ JDP-500, *Campaign Planning*, Ch. 2, para. 220, 2-9.

⁸ See Buller's correspondence dated 24 Dec. 84, quoted at Melville, *Life of Buller*, 208.

⁹ Colvile, OH, i, 132-3.

¹⁰ Wolseley, journal entries 30 and 31 Dec. 84; Ibid, 101-2.

¹¹ Wolseley to Baring, 31 Dec. 84; Egypt No. 1/1885, 132. See also Colvile, OH, i, 138.

up, that Wolseley should be so badly rattled by a simple injunction not to do so. How could a long-besieged Gordon possibly enjoy a superior understanding of the broader operational situation than the commander of an approaching relief expedition? Any camel-borne operation for the capture of Berber, required to jump-off from Metemmeh and return there subsequently, a round-trip of 184 miles, could not fail to consume a fortnight and might well have taken three weeks. It seems likely, then, that Gordon imagined the operation being mounted by steamer, his own standard *modus operandi*, albeit such a foray would still have eaten up 6-7 days. The fundamental problem was that where Gordon imagined that the capture of Berber might be achieved relatively quickly by only a few hundred men, Wolseley envisaged the need for a deliberate operation with a far more powerful force. The former scheme was bold, quick but risky, while the latter was cautious, safe but slower. Gordon's plan might well have worked. Wolseley's was sure to work, but at a price in lost days which Khartoum could no longer afford. There is no doubt that Wolseley felt great anxiety over the dangers inherent in dashing across the last hundred miles, with only 1,800 fighting men, once Gordon had enjoined him to keep his combat power concentrated. Gordon's injunction on Berber and the subsequent governmental direction on risk provided him with twin let-out clauses: reasons not to pursue a course of action which his soldierly instincts were telling him was tactically and logistically inadvisable.

The date 14 December, the day on which Gordon rehearsed his final courier, has added significance as the point at which he drew his journal to a close. The final entry makes his purported injunction on Berber all the more peculiar, although it has no bearing on how Wolseley reacted to it as it was not until 21 January that a British officer¹ actually got to read the last page of the journal:

Now MARK THIS, [sic] if the Expeditionary Force, and I ask for no more than two hundred men, does not come in ten days, the town may fall; and I have done my best for the honour of our country. Good bye.

C. G. Gordon.

You send me no information, though you have lots of money.

C. G. G.²

We can only presume that Gordon thought that the relief expedition was within easy striking distance of Berber, as indeed it ought to have been if Khartoum was to be saved. He might also have expected his message to get to Wolseley much quicker than it did. But another nightmarish possibility also presents itself. It is surely not inconceivable, given the desperate tenor of the words he committed to paper the same day, that Gordon never actually said, 'Do not leave Berber in your rear.' Might something have been garbled in translation? Gordon had only a smattering of Arabic and so has to have made use of an interpreter in briefing his courier. Similarly the

¹ Wilson as it turned out.

² Gordon's Journal, entry 14 Dec. 84; see Hake (ed.), *Gordon Journals*, 395.

debriefing at the other end of the journey would also have been conducted through an interpreter. Was the man confidently word perfect when he delivered the message? Did he struggle at all to remember what Gordon Pasha had said? Did Wolseley's interpreter prompt him with leading questions? These are things we simply do not know and are unlikely ever to know. One thing is certain: by New Year's Eve, the day on which the courier finally reached Wolseley, Gordon would have asked only for the best possible speed. Quite how he held out for another 25 days, without a mutiny or some other form of collapse amongst his starving troops is a tribute to his leadership, his strength of character and the generally unacknowledged resolve of his Sudanese and Egyptian soldiers.

What Gordon's advice on Berber did not do is seal his fate. It arrived with Wolseley far too late for that. By 31 December the die had been cast; Stewart had commenced his first journey into the Bayūda Desert and the shuttle-run to Jakdul Wells was already afoot. The real significance of Gordon's last message was that it caused Wolseley to wobble. When Stewart got back to Korti it was to find that the army commander would no longer be accompanying him on the return journey to Jakdul, and that the intent was no longer to dash for Khartoum, but rather to send a fact-finding mission ahead of the fighting echelon. There would be no move on Khartoum by combat units until after Sir Charles Wilson had spoken with Gordon and returned to Korti to make his report. If Gordon felt able to hold on for a few more weeks, Stewart would be sent north from Metemmeh to cooperate with the River Column in the seizure of Berber. The unified force would then proceed south to Khartoum in full-strength. Only if Wilson's report indicated that Gordon was in *extremis* would Wolseley go forward to Metemmeh and lead the Desert Column in a dash for Khartoum.¹

8.3 THE HYPOTHETICAL RELIEF OF KHARTOUM: WHAT NEXT?

In pursuit of a wider understanding of the challenges still ahead of Wolseley at the point at which Khartoum fell, let us now imagine a hypothetical set of circumstances in which things have gone rather better in respect of time, the single most important factor in the military problem. Let us suppose that Gladstone had succumbed to public opinion and fired the strategic starting-gun some weeks earlier, with the result that the seasonal fall in the Nile no longer presented quite the same array of problems as would later be the case. In other words that at some point in early December the unified force, camel-borne and whaler-borne, having completed the 400-mile circuit around the Great Bend, taking Abū-Hamed and Berber *en route*, now reaches Metemmeh from the north. We will set aside the compelling assumptions that a Kirbikān type battle will likely have been fought, that gaining Metemmeh will entail a third successive assault on a defended urban area, that casualties are mounting, ammunition is depleting and medical resources are already at full stretch.

Wolseley can field a fighting force, including the Egyptian and Sudanese troops aboard the steamers, of around 5,000 men. Not less than one quarter of his strength would be lost to securing Abū-Hamed, Berber, Metemmeh and other key points on the

¹ Wolseley, journal entry 2 Jan. 85; see Preston (ed.), *Relief of Gordon*, 105.

lines of communication. He then sets out across the last hundred miles. A number of imponderables now come into play. Does the Mahdī maintain the siege and send a detached wing of the army to contest the British advance in the north, (halfway would be in the vicinity of Wad Habeshi and Mernat)? Or does he keep his force concentrated and fight a battle of decision near Omdurman? Abu Klea and Abu Kru provide the precedent to show that defeat in the north is not a precursor to the disintegration of the movement. It is less certain whether it would have held together in the wake of a serious defeat at Omdurman, primarily because the Mahdīst ‘centre of gravity’ was the movement’s faith in the divinity of its leader and such a fight would not be something he would be able to side-step: a defeat would be *his* defeat and the price for it would be his personal credibility. But Muḥammad Aḥmad was shrewd enough to know that bringing matters to a battle of decision was not his best option in any case. By far his best course of action was simply to retreat 25 miles up the White Nile and wait. In such a scenario Wolseley would have entered the city, without having encountered serious resistance, with a force of about 3,750 men. What then?

The city, still with around 14,000 loyalist citizens and a mixed Egyptian-Sudanese garrison of around 8,000 men within its walls, is nearing the end of its food stocks. The surrounding countryside has been swept bare by Gordon in preparing for the siege and by the Mahdīst host subsequently: there is plainly no option to live off the land. Over the next month the Nile will fall dramatically and cannot be relied upon as an arterial line of supply. There are virtually no camels at Korti to sustain an overland line of supply across the Bayūda. Osman Digna and the Bīja rebels are still at large astride the Berber-Suakin Road and there is no significant British field force at Suakin. Wolseley, with a dwindling stock of ammunition, and quite unable to feed his force at Khartoum for any length of time, has no option but to fall back to the north within a matter of days.¹

What would have become of the 22,000 Egyptian and Sudanese soldiers and civilians still at Khartoum? Wolseley could hardly steal out with the governor-general like a thief in the night; if nothing else this was inconsistent with his yearning for a crowning triumph to his career. His feat could not be sullied by the accusations of betrayal which were certain to follow. Even if two-thirds of the citizenry had been prepared to stay behind and throw themselves on the mercy of the Mahdī, an option they had already declined once, when Gordon threw open the gates of the city to

¹ Gordon’s final journal entry of 14 December records the quantities left in his food warehouses at that juncture. There were, he tells us, 546 ‘ardebs of dhoora’ and 83,525 ‘okes’ of biscuit. *Ardebs* and *okes* are old Ottoman units of measure. *Dhoora* or *dhura* is a sorghum or cereal grass. The kernels could be made into flour, while the green plants served as animal feed. An *ardeb* is the equivalent of 5.62 Imperial ‘bushels’, while a bushel is the equivalent of 8 ‘dry gallons’. There were therefore 24,548 dry gallons of *dhura* in stock. This quantity is probably best imagined by thinking of a bushel as a round basket of about a foot deep and two feet in diameter. Thus there were something around 3,050 such baskets in Gordon’s warehouses. An *oke* is the equivalent of 2.75lbs or 1.24kg. This means that there were 229,693lbs or 103,571kg of biscuit left on 14 December. These quantities had to suffice for 22,000 souls, around 8,000 of whom were under arms. If Gordon was feeding only his soldiers from 14 December, then there were only 10.44lbs of biscuit left per fighting man. One pound of biscuit would suffice as a standard biscuit ration for one day, but both the physical condition and the morale of men eating only biscuit day would deteriorate very quickly. It seems evident, therefore, that the food warehouses would have been all but played out by Christmas and empty by the New Year.

those who wished to leave, how would a straggling convoy of ten thousand or more refugees have fared in a great overland retreat? The famished Egyptian troops would have been in no condition either to march long distances or to fight in the open, and were of doubtful quality to begin with. The civilian population was in an even worse condition. Soldiers and citizens alike would have clustered themselves around the British troops for protection and, more likely than not, have flown into a panic when attacked. It is not difficult to imagine a hard-pressed retreat turning into a repetition of the Hicks disaster. Even if a retreat into Dongola had been unopposed, it seems certain that a great many people would have died of exhaustion or malnutrition along the way.

And what of events to Wolseley's rear: either the Mahdists occupy Khartoum and show clemency to the surrendered population, or the city is given over to rapine and slaughter in precisely the same way as occurred on the night 25/26 January and the succeeding 2-3 days. Because it was the colonial capital city, full of what would have been seen by barefooted Kordofanis as treasure, it is unlikely that the Mahdī would even have attempted to impose restraint. The ultimate outcome, then, even if Khartoum had been relieved, is still a great slaughter of civilians, a Mahdīst plundering of the capital and the rise subsequently of a Dervish military state. This is what cabinet ministers and military campaign planners alike should have been capable of foreseeing. There is a strong hint in Wilson's orders that Wolseley may indeed have foreseen the insurmountable difficulties ahead. The only counter he had to offer was the gratuitous wishful thinking reflected in the orders:

It is always possible that when Mohammed Ahmed [sic] fully realises that an English Army is approaching Khartum [sic] he will retreat, and thus raise the siege. Khartum would, under such circumstances, continue to be the political centre of our operations, but Berber would become our military objective. No British troops would be sent to Khartum beyond a few red coats in steamers for the purpose of impressing upon the inhabitants the fact that it was to the presence of our army they owed their safety.

The siege of Khartum being thus raised, all our military arrangements would be made with a view to the immediate occupation of Berber, and to a march across the desert to Ariab on the Suakin road.¹

It seems clear from this passage that the logistic difficulties of getting to Khartoum, and of sustaining any sizeable force there, were of such an order that Wolseley did not want to press south of Metemneh in strength unless absolutely compelled to do so. In other words, by the time Sir Herbert Stewart set out from Korti in full-strength, Wolseley could already see the writing on the wall. He kept going because he had no other choice, precisely the same quandary with which Sir Charles Wilson would later be confronted.

It is difficult to conceive, even if Wolseley's wildest fantasies had come true and the Mahdists had fallen back, say 25 miles up the White Nile, at the mere approach of two steamers, quite how he imagined the Khartoum garrison could then save itself

¹ Colvile, OH, ii, 9.

without the assistance of British troops. Did he seriously imagine that Gordon would suddenly throw up his hands in joy, forsake his defences and march 8,000 malnourished soldiers and an unknowable number of starving civilian refugees out into the desert to begin plodding the 98 miles to Metemmeh? The optimists and unfortunates left behind in Khartoum would have been put to the sword on the afternoon of the same day, while Gordon's straggling thousands would have been massacred by lunchtime the day after. All this was beyond wishing thinking; it was delusional.

8.4 THE ALTERNATE COURSE OF ACTION – A SUAKIN-BERBER HYPOTHESIS

8.4.1 Time and Space

With the starting gun having been fired in early August, it is inconceivable that a comparably sized and organized force as the Desert Column – making use of troops drawn from across the Army of Occupation (backfilled from Malta, Gibraltar and Britain), stores shipped down from Cairo, and camels shipped across the Red Sea from Arabia – would not have been able to set out from Suakin by the end of September at the latest. It would thus have been in a position to attack and secure Berber, which was no more strongly held than Metemmeh, but much more isolated from the support of the main Mahdist force at Omdurman, by no later than mid-October. Berber was four days' steaming from Khartoum. Having gained the river that much earlier, and with the Nile still high, the passage of the Sixth Cataract would have been nothing like as fraught as would prove to be the case in the New Year.

8.4.2 Combat Power

While it is true that such a plan would not have been a walk in the park and would not immediately have put 5,000 well-supplied men on the Nile, within striking distance of Khartoum, as Wolseley sought, neither did the whaler scheme do so. Instead it brought the 3,000 men of General Earle's River Column deep into the Sudan, only to render them irrelevant to the relief of Khartoum. Quite how many infantry battalions could have marched to Berber in a month-long period, following the capture of the town by an 1,800 man advanced guard under Stewart, is a moot point; but since Wolseley's plan failed to bring a single additional infantryman to bear, even if only three battalions had been able to complete the march, the British hand would still have been significantly stronger.

8.4.3 Water Supply

The objection to the Suakin-Berber road that Wolseley always fell back on was shortage of water along the route. Let us then remind ourselves, by again referring to the orders given to Sir Charles Wilson, just how he intended to extricate his 5,000-man force from the depths of central Sudan: 'The siege of Khartoum being thus raised, all our military arrangements would be made with a view to the immediate occupation of

Berber, and to a march across the desert to Ariab on the Suakin road.' If there was sufficient water to sustain a force of several thousand men marching from Berber to Suakin, as envisaged by the Grand Conception, why was there not also sufficient water to sustain a force of the same size marching in the opposite direction? Let us not forget either that Suakin-Berber had for many years been the standard route by which the Egyptian military moved its units to and from Khartoum.

It transpires that the Intelligence Branch of the War Office was thoroughly conversant with the wells and watering holes along the way. A document called *Report on the Egyptian Provinces of the Sudan, Red Sea, and Equator* was published by HMSO, on behalf of the Intelligence Branch, in July 1884, doubtless in anticipation of operations still to come. Amongst the subjects covered by the pocket-sized publication, evidently intended to be carried in the field, was leg-by-leg detail on all the major routes in Sudan including, at pages 176-7, the Suakin-Berber caravan road. These pages are headed, 'From report by Lieutenant Colonel D.H. Stewart, 11th Hussars, 12th January 1883.' These two pages are reproduced at Appendix A.

In terms of water supply, the critical part of the route was the last 100 miles. Ariab, to which Wolseley had made reference in Wilson's orders, was about 140 miles from Suakin and was described by Colborne as, 'the prettiest oasis between Suakin and Berber'.¹ According to Colonel Hammill Stewart there were 'two wells, revetted with stone, and about 50 or 60 feet deep'. This was not ideal for watering large numbers of animals in haste, but ease the rapidity with which a force is required to move and the problem is mitigated by degrees. It was about 40 miles from Ariab to the wells at Obak, where Stewart tells us there were, 'many wells with fair water, but they are constantly being filled up.' He was referring here to the nuisance of wind-blown sand, but this could readily have been dug out by the troops. After Obak came a harsh, waterless plain of about 51 miles. The next stop was Bir Mahobeh where there was a 'large revetted well with good water'. Another 17 miles brought the traveller to the Nile at Berber. In other words there was nowhere where camel-borne troops would have to go more than two days and one night without the opportunity to replenish their water. We have seen that the issued water-skins allowed individuals to carry up to seven gallons aboard their camels. The Desert Column marched with a small number of reserve water tanks aboard the baggage-train, the quantity of which could have been increased at the expense of the vast quantities of rations being carried out into the Bayūda. We have seen also that MICR marched from Korti to Jakdul Wells, a distance of 98 miles, and arrived there with a good deal of water left in their skins. If the human souls could clearly take care of themselves for a week, without difficulty, we have also seen how the ponies and camels of the Desert Column marched from Korti to Abu Halfā, 80 miles into the Bayūda, without so much as a drop of water.

Wolseley had always contended that the idea of a column emerging from 50 miles of 'waterless' desert to fight for Berber, rendered the Suakin-Berber route a non-starter.² The argument is not only belied by the performance of the Desert Column in the Bayūda, but also conveniently overlooks the water at Bir Mahobeh, which would have offered a small force, tasked with seizing a foothold on the Nile, the opportunity

¹ Colborne, *With Hicks Pasha*, 40.

² Wolseley to Hartington, 8 Apr. 84; Colville, OH, i, 29.

to replenish a mere 17 miles from the river. Most of the wells in the Nubian Desert could be drained if they were drawn upon by hundreds of men and animals at one sitting, but then generally recharged themselves within 24 hours. In a less frantic advance than Stewart was compelled to make in January, there would have been time in hand to allow for this. Of note is that Hick Pasha's journey to Khartoum proves that a force of around 450 men could travel the route without a hint of difficulty.¹ That being so it is reasonable to infer that 600 men could have done it with only a minimal amount of hardship. Could 600 men have seized Berber? Possibly, but it would certainly represent a challenging undertaking. Could 600 men have seized and held a lodgement on the Nile, within striking distance of Berber, until another 600 men came up 24-36 hours later, and then another 600 after that and so on? Provided they were on carefully chosen ground and well supplied with ammunition, then based on the directly analogous lodgement at Gubat, the answer would have to be yes.

8.4.4 Camel Transport

Writing in his journal on Thursday 15 January, by which time it must have been obvious to the slowest wit in the army that the whaler scheme had backfired, Wolseley comforted himself by observing that marching 5,000 men to Berber from the coast would have required the support of 50,000 camels.² We have seen that he had earlier offered to command just such an expedition, when in May it had looked as if HMG was about to rule in favour of Suakin-Berber. The 50,000 figure was no more than hyperbole, but whatever the actual scale of the requirement, it would have been far easier for the world's greatest maritime power to assemble 12,000 camels at Suakin, with the whole of Ottoman Arabia just across the Red Sea, than it was to round up the 7,000 or so animals the transport officers eventually scraped together from Cairo and the Nile Valley. As it turned out 7,000 animals was nothing like enough to sustain the needs of the Nile Expedition, so that here was another domain where Wolseley's preferred axis would be found wanting. When on 17 January, General Earle telegraphed Buller to ask for a paltry 40 baggage-camels, he received the reply, 'I have not a camel or driver to send. They are in the desert.'³

8.4.5 The Enemy Factor

What of the Berberine rebels and the recalcitrant Bija clans in the Red Sea Littoral? The Bija were impoverished desert nomads who had been whipped up by Islamist invective and the promise of rich pickings. After a difficult start, they had been rewarded with a succession of easy victories over the Egyptians. The opportunity to plunder Suakin, the littoral's 'county town' so to speak, represented the height of their military ambitions. They had come close to achieving this, but with the Graham intervention of February-March 1884 promptly received two severe drubbings at 2nd El Teb and Tamai. In the

¹ Colborne, *With Hicks Pasha*, 44. Colborne establishes the presence of 300 *bāshi-būzuqs* and 100 Egyptian soldiers: hence, with the staff officers and servants, not fewer than 450 men in all.

² Wolseley, journal entry 15 Jan. 85; see Preston (ed.), *Relief of Gordon*, 118.

³ Brackenbury, *River Column*, 61.

former action they fielded 6-8,000 men, of whom something between a quarter and a third became casualties. At Tamai they deployed 9-12,000 men and suffered more than 2,000 casualties. They then melted away into the *khors* and hills and offered no further resistance to Graham. The Prime Minister's insistence that the expedition be withdrawn precluded final political settlement and pacification.

When in the spring of 1885, in the aftermath of the fall of Khartoum, Sir Gerald Graham again deployed, he fought a reconstituted Bija host which did not at any point exceed 5,000 men. The British did the attacking at Hashin, seven miles from Suakin, but the decisive action came two days later when the rebels fell upon Major General Sir John McNeill's force at Tofrek. While the enemy caught McNeill on the hop in thick scrub, almost gaining an improbable victory, the tide of battle quickly turned in favour of the British. Of 5,000 rebels on the field not fewer than 1,100 and possibly as many as 1,500 were killed. Such crippling casualties brought serious Bija resistance to an end and once again cleared the way to long-term pacification of the littoral, a second bite at the apple which would again be squandered. The key point about the two Suakin campaigns is that they showed that the British needed only to march a few miles into the desert to be attacked *en masse*, by an unfailingly aggressive enemy. On each of the three occasions that Graham's force sallied out of Suakin in strength, there was a heavy engagement within ten miles of the port. In other words, the Bija enemy was inherently predictable. The campaign of March 1885, by which time Osman had been allowed a year to reconstitute his strength, usefully provides us with our worst case parameters for a hypothetical campaign mounted six months earlier in September or October 1884.

It seems not at all unreasonable to infer that the six infantry battalions wasted in the whalers could have been put to much better use in the Red Sea Littoral. If Wolseley and Earle had marched from Suakin with a brigade-sized square of four battalions, supported by the 19th Hussars and a battery of screw-guns, they would, in our worst case scenario, have been attacked within 24-48 hours by a force of about 5,000 rebels; the best that Osman could do after the losses inflicted at Tamai some months earlier. With Wolseley in command, who would not have been so foolish as to entangle his force in close scrub, the British would in all likelihood have gained a resounding victory in which another 1,500 rebels would have been killed or maimed, an eventuality which must have marked an end to effective resistance in the littoral.

8.4.6 The Real Intelligence Picture in the Red Sea Littoral

Intelligence reports from Suakin dated September 1884 serve to illustrate the real-world situation at precisely the point in time at which these hypothetical operations would have been taking place. Their gist makes it plain that the rebels were not only hungry, scattered and demoralised, but also outnumbered by Amarar 'friendlies'. This suggests that the actual threat would in all likelihood have fallen some way short of our worst case scenario. On 6 September Commodore Molyneux aboard *HMS Sphinx* reported to C-In-C Mediterranean that:

...the Hadendowas [sic] and others with Osman Digna are suffering great privation from want of food...and that many are sick and suffering from wounds. Getting no satisfaction from their appeals to Osman Digna, the following tribes, viz., Camerar, Garieb, Meshab, and Hamelab [sic] held a meeting, and decided that they would offer their submission to the Government on condition of a free pardon, but that they would go to Mahomed Ahmed [sic] (the Mahdi) if he came here.

...The Amarars [friendly] have succeeded in making some important captures of cattle, grain &c, from the rebels along the Berber road; but Lieutenant Colonel Chermside¹ has discouraged their attacking Handoub, as the rebels are entrenched there, and as we cannot support them, a reverse might be fatal to the policy we are trying to pursue. Osman Digna is said to have reinforced the Handoub garrison, which may number 1,000 men, and has supplied them with two camel-loads of ammunition.

...the night attacks on Suakin during the last week or more have been fewer and have evidently been made by much smaller bodies of men than formerly, and with less spirit...²

On 11 September Molyneux reported to Hay in more detail:

The Amarars [friendly] and Hadendowas [hostile] are facing each other on the Berber road, the former with their headquarters at Essibil, the latter at Handoub. Both sides have been considerably reinforced, and according to the most recent accounts the enemy numbers about 2,000 and the Amarars about 3,000 men.

The force at Tamai, where I believe Osman Digna still remains, is reduced to about 400 men. Deserters from both of the rebel camps come in frequently, and all accounts agree that Osman Digna is losing his influence with the people, and the tribes have returned to their former custom of holding tribal meetings to discuss matters of importance instead of blindly obeying Osman Digna's orders...

...The night attacks on Suakin have almost entirely ceased and the rebels are rarely seen on the plain in the day-time.³

On 27 September 1884 Major General Fremantle telegraphed Sir Frederick Stephenson to report:

Events continue to appear satisfactory. Osman still at Tamai with weak force. Yesterday Karb Mohammed has sent by messenger to say enemy near Abat hungry, discouraged, encumbered with sick and wounded. Handoub [sic] empty, and plain clear of enemy at present.⁴

¹ Chermside was governor of Suakin but had formerly been one of Wilson's subordinates in Anatolia.

² Molyneux to Hay, 6 Sep. 84; Egypt No.1/1885, 1.

³ Ibid, 14.

⁴ Molyneux to Hay, 6 Sep. 84; Egypt No.1/1885, 12.

8.4.7 Scheme of Manoeuvre

Following what would in all probability have been a relatively easy victory on the coastal plain, Wolseley could then have launched Sir Herbert Stewart and the Desert Column for Ariab, 7-10 days march into the desert. A week after arriving at Ariab, Stewart would have been reaching across the final leg of his march, to secure a lodgement on the Nile, just south of Berber. Concurrent political operations in the littoral, mounted by somebody of Sir Charles Wilson's ilk, would have stood a good chance of securing the submission of the rebellious tribes, an eventuality which would have obliged the pestilential Osman to flee back to his master. Even if some Bīja clans remained hostile, the six infantry battalions and large numbers of Amara friendlies would have been available for follow-up operations, convoy-escort duty on the road, or as garrisons at the wells and staging posts on Stewart's lines of communication. Stewart's fighting echelon, instead of being entirely camel-borne, which greatly increased the amount of water required, could have had a significant infantry component. If Egyptian infantry routinely marched to Berber, as had been the case in former years, then so too could well acclimatised British infantry, albeit not without some heatstroke cases. A Royal Engineer company could have done much to improve the water supply along the route. If the same money, energy and ingenuity invested in the whaler scheme had been diverted into viable means of transporting water in the desert, a number of practical expedients would doubtless have been arrived at.¹ In short, forcing the Suakin-Berber road would not have been the impossibly difficult operation of war that Wolseley had chosen to portray it as during the 'Battle of the Routes.'

What of Muḥammad al-Khair at the far end of the caravan road? The Berberine rebels sent about 3,000 men to assist Mūsā wad Ḥilu's Kordofanis in resisting Stewart's advance across the Bayūda. But let us allow Muḥammad al-Khair a total fighting force of 4,000 men. In the scenario now postulated, Stewart's advance along the Suakin-Berber axis is taking place in the second half of October, and on the opposite bank of the Nile. This means that Omdurman, on the west bank, is still securely held by Gordon, while the river, still high, is commanded effectively by his flotilla of steamers. News that the British are coming, and that they have already beaten Osman on the coast, has travelled down the Suakin-Berber road. The Mahdī knows it and Gordon's spies detect it. Morale amongst the besieging rebels is damaged and that of the garrison boosted. It seems not unreasonable to suggest that Muḥammad al-Khair, who in the real world of January 1885 sent his fighting men south to resist Stewart, would, in the hypothetical world of late October/early November 1884, have sent them *east* to resist Stewart. Equally, if in January the Mahdists advanced one tactical bound into the desert, to interpose themselves between the British and the wells at Abu Klea, a distance of 25 miles, would they not also have advanced 17 miles east of Berber, to a blocking position in front of the wells at Bir Mahobeh? Advancing from Obak, 50 miles to his rear, a direct parallel with the distance between Jakdul Wells and Abu Klea Wells, Stewart must again fight to secure the water ahead. What differentiates the

¹ Such as the apparently excellent 'indiarubber' bags uniquely carried by Beresford's naval brigade.

real-world Battle of Abu Klea from the hypothetical 'Battle of Bir Mahobeh' is that crucially they are fought on opposite sides of the Nile. It would not have been possible with Omdurman still in Gordon's hands for the Mahdists to have detached so sizeable a force northwards. It seems likely, therefore, that the Battle of Bir Mahobeh would have been fought against a Mahdist force safely less than half the size of the host at Abu Klea. Not only would it have been much smaller, but it could not have included any Kordofani shock troops. It follows that the probable outcome would have been a handsome British victory, free of the sort of mauling inflicted by the Kordofanis at Abu Klea. So small and roundly defeated a Mahdist force would likely have been incapable of mounting a second round of resistance at the river. Berber might well have been abandoned without a fight, but if not could have been attacked in concert by Stewart's column and Gordon's steamers.

Thus, without quibbling about a few days here or there, it seems apparent that the same result, which by river had taken until 21 January to achieve, could easily have been achieved overland from Suakin by the end of the first week in November. It would then have been possible to put 500 British troops aboard the steamers, cruise them past the cheering garrison of Fort Omdurman four days later and disembark in front of the sarāya on or about 12/13 November. Between mid-November and the end of December large convoys could have moved along the Suakin-Berber road, bringing up more supplies and reinforcements. While the steamers returned to Berber, to bring up another 500 men by the end of the third week of November, a force of brigade strength could simultaneously have been advancing south along the east bank of the Nile, with the river interposing between it and the enemy's main force. It would thus have been possible to have had a minimum of 3-4,000 British troops operating in conjunction with a still well-nourished 8,000-strong Egyptian/Sudanese garrison and 8 well-armed river steamers, against an enemy force of around 30,000 men. With a tenable, albeit lengthy, overland line of communications, running along the line North Fort-Shendy-Berber-Obak-Ariab-Suakin-Royal Navy, the relief expedition would have had a longer loiter time in the vicinity of Khartoum.

While Mahdist capacity would have been undermined by its dispersal between the west bank of the White Nile and the south bank of the Blue Nile, Wolseley and Gordon would have enjoyed the advantage of operating on interior lines. There can be little doubt that they would have gained a swift victory which, at the very least, would have compelled an enemy withdrawal to El Obeid. It is unlikely that the inherently fractious rebel host would have held together in the wake of so great a reverse. Such a victory would have allowed the garrison to be evacuated to Berber and points beyond in perfect safety. It would not immediately have solved the question of the Sudan's longer term governance but, as had always been the case, that was a political matter. It is possible that having gained a military victory at Khartoum, HMG would have been sufficiently emboldened to allow Gordon to proceed with his plan to install Zubair Pasha as his successor.¹ Large parts of the Sudan would inevitably have become ungoverned space, but that was no more than a reflection of the British government's original Desired Outcome.

¹ The best primary source coverage of the Zubair issue is to be found at Cromer, *Modern Egypt*, i.

8.5 STRATEGIC LEVEL CULPABILITY

Gladstone governed the strategic level and delayed authorising a relief expedition to the point where it necessarily became a touch and go affair. What he did not do was tell the War Office in general or Lord Wolseley in particular, how to go about achieving the Campaign Objective. Even so the Prime Minister cannot be entirely exonerated of operational level blame, as it was his strategic level inaction which squeezed the window in time and space to such an extent that it acted as a major contributory factor in the foundering of the Campaign Design process. The Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for War had the power to adjudicate against Wolseley's proposals and, moreover, had good grounds for doing so, given that C-in-C Mediterranean Station and GOC Cairo had both proffered advice to the contrary. Every conceivable argument for and against appeared in the letters pages of the national press. The politicians chose, however, to back the judgement of the man who had conquered Egypt. Ultimately it was the wrong call; not for the first or the last time, the government's military advice would prove to be unsound. Thus Gladstone's culpability carries through into the operational level, while Hartington, free of any strategic level blame, must now bear at least partial responsibility for dislodging Stephenson and giving Wolseley a free hand. The essential error perpetrated at the War Office was that of committing to a course of action without ever recognising that in war the clock never stops; that time and space equations can only contract; that a good plan laid today might not hold water tomorrow. Nonetheless it must be noted that Hartington was a man of honour and acted in all good faith throughout the crisis. Without his determined and strident endeavours, Gladstone and Granville would certainly have abandoned Gordon altogether, much to the detriment of British 'prestige' and the ire of the public.

8.6 OPERATIONAL LEVEL CULPABILITY

As GOC Cairo, Sir Frederick Stephenson was an operational level role-player. Gordon's presence in the Sudan was an 'Egyptian matter', however, and as such was Baring's business. It was only when the consul-general turned to him for military advice that Stephenson was able to influence the conduct of Egyptian government business. Baring was more inclined to turn to the younger, more widely renowned Wood for advice, in consequence of which there was a certain amount of friction in play, although this was not a serious impediment to the trio coming together as an effective civil-military triumvirate. There is nothing which the triumvirate in general or Baring in particular did to prevent Khartoum's salvation. On the contrary, Baring recognised the moral imperative to stand by Gordon and did everything possible to provide London with consistent and measured advice. When it became clear that only direct military intervention could avert a tragedy, he became a firm advocate of a relief expedition. Sir Frederick Stephenson's actions are particularly interesting, because he started feeding assets up the Nile, without recourse to the whalers, prior to Wolseley's appointment.

The advantage of an immediate high-Nile passage to Dongola by *nuggar* was demonstrated by the movements of 1st Royal Sussex. Initially sent to protect Upper Egypt, from a blocking position at Aswan, in mid-August the battalion received new orders to proceed upriver to Wādī Halfā. It reached its destination on 26 August and, a week or so later, was ordered forward to Dongola. It bypassed the 2nd Cataract by means of the short stretch of railway running south to Sarras, where, on 6 September, Colonel Vandeleur again embarked his men aboard *nuggars*. His first half-battalion gained Dongola in only 13 days, whereas the same 210-mile journey took the whalers five weeks.¹ The officers and men of the Royal Sussex were fated to spend three months kicking their heels, with only an outbreak of smallpox to show for it, while the rest of the Nile Expedition caught up with them. The battalion's movements show that it would have been possible to launch a force of comparable or greater size than the Desert Column, (which given the easy going in the Bayūda need not have been wholly camel-borne), from Korti to Metemmeh as early as late-October. Any inadvisable denuding of Cairo and Alexandria could have been backfilled by battalions rushed to Egypt from Malta, Gibraltar or Britain. The whalers could have followed up in their own time, bringing up reinforcements and supplies to Korti, ultimately to serve as a means of *returning* downriver at low-Nile. Neither Wolseley nor Stephenson would have seen this as a complete plan, on the grounds that it might only have delivered 3,000 men to Metemmeh, but nonetheless this was a thousand more than would eventually make it there under Wolseley's plan. Three thousand men, some weeks earlier, might just have worked. But it was the judgement that more than twice that number would be required for safety's sake that drove Stephenson, with his seemingly superior grasp of time and space, to express a preference for Suakin-Berber. What Wolseley seems to have been unable to grasp is that the long transit of the Great Bend, (an essential enabler to the Grand Conception of course), was wholly untenable in the context of reaching Khartoum in time – the only officially endorsed Campaign Objective. In the event, he left himself just enough time to mount a dash across the Bayūda, but even then subsequently fell prey to indecision. Stephenson did nothing to impede the mounting of a relief expedition and provided consistently sound advice when consulted. Left to his own devices, he would not have mounted a Nile expedition, but would have selected the Suakin-Berber axis instead. Accordingly no share of operational level culpability can be attributed to him.

8.6.1 Wolseley's Novel Expedients: Success or Failure?

We have seen when the whaler scheme became public it served to trigger a furore in the newspapers. Much more importantly key military players such as C-in-C Mediterranean and GOC Cairo came out against it.² The so-called 'Battle of the Routes' then ensued. The extent and bitterness of the opposition to his scheme should have given Wolseley pause for thought. When challenged on the viability of the whaler scheme, Wolseley contrived a written submission to ministers by three of his old Red River comrades. No doubt the Canadian operation of 1870 had presented some

¹ Macdonald, *Too Late*, 17.

² Colvile, OH, i, 32 & 37.

formidable challenges, but to transpose directly the lessons learned on one river, to an altogether different river, on an altogether different continent, overthrowing all the best local and expert advice in the process, would seem to be the epitome of dogmatic thinking.

The whalers did allow great logistic tonnages to be moved forward of Wādī Halfā with a minimum of effort, as the troops were sat amidst their food and ammunition and could never want for water. In purely logistic terms the whaler scheme was an excellent one; in particular neutralising water supply as an issue was a very compelling advantage indeed. But the real issue was not *whether* the whalers would get up the Nile, but *how quickly* they would get up the Nile.

When Wolseley devised and briefed his scheme in April 1884, in reasonable expectation of being able to exploit high-Nile to good advantage, it may indeed have been the optimal way of attaining the object. What is clear, however, is that by August when Gladstone finally relented, it no longer represented the best option. Indeed it can be compellingly argued that it was no sort of option at all. Butler remained proudly unrepentant to the end of his days, but was much inclined to isolate the boat scheme, his direct responsibility, from its wider operational context. Illustratively, it did not matter in the slightest if it took 40 days to get from A to B, if it had taken 60 days to get the whalers to A in the first place; the total journey time to B is not 40 days but 100 days. In his *Campaign of the Cataracts*, published two years after Gordon's death, he wrote:

Not only had the fleet equipped the whole Desert Column, and supplied it with food to last two months, but it had also brought to Korti three months' food for the River Column; and this result had been achieved in an average of forty days from start to finish, or at the rate of ten and a half miles per diem, cataracts included. One officer and six men had been drowned, a few boats had been lost, but nine-tenths of the fleet were in as sound condition as on the day they had left the English building yards. Standing on the high river bank at Korti, and looking down, day after day, upon scores of boats coming in, closing up their crews and cargoes, and giving out a vast surplus supply to feed the Desert Column, one could not help letting the mind run back to four months earlier, when the prophets of disaster had been loudest in their opposition. How many men were we not to have lost by sunstroke, by disease, by crocodile, and by cataract! What ignorance, what folly, what madness was this scheme of a boat expedition! And here, today, were these much abused boats piling out upon the shore at Korti box upon box of the best English provisions, equipping a desert force of 2000 men for a long campaign, and having still, for the use of another 3000 men, sufficient food supplies to last three entire months.

And the men whose labour under the sun and over the cataracts had achieved this result in these boats – were they the gaunt and sickly skeletons foretold by the wise ones? They were models of strength – pictures of health. Brown, sinewy and muscular, they sat at the oars or tramped the shore with the track-line in all the ease and freedom of a perfect knowledge of their work.¹

¹ Butler, *Campaign of the Cataracts*, 266-7.

All this was perfectly true, but in an operational context it was also irrelevant. Elsewhere in his book Butler hit the nail on the head when he wrote:

...far better the long road which has water in the desert, than the short one which is without it. I have said that but for one consideration there could have been no hesitation between the routes to be followed from Korti. That consideration was, however, all important. It was time. The New Year had begun; the date to which Khartoum could hold out had been already passed, and if the place was to be succoured and Gordon saved, the attempt, cost what it might, must be made across the 180 miles of desert, and not by the 400 miles of river, to Metemma [sic].¹

Immediately after this passage, Butler gives vent to the same sort of gratuitous wishful thinking as occurs in Wolseley's orders to Wilson.

One month earlier at Korti, and there would have been no need of this desert dash. The entire force – horses, camels, and boats moving along the river and its shores – would have reached Metemma by the 10th of January and Khartoum ten days later. The Cataracts of Shaggieh, which we shall soon see, would have presented half the difficulties of passage they were now destined to oppose to us; and the line of the Nile taken along its loop, would have cleared every enemy before us, opened up at Abu Hamad [sic] the road to Korosko, and at Berber that to Suakin; and meeting Gordon's steamers at Berber would have carried to Khartoum the advanced guard of an army secure in its strength, its resources and its unmenaced [sic] base.²

Butler writes in this third passage as if the attainment of all these goals lay just around the corner. The truth, though, was that the presence of 3,000 whaler-borne troops at Korti was an operational irrelevance. On 30 December 1884, when the Desert Column commenced its operations in the Bayūda, the whaler-borne battalions had not even started the 400-mile transit of the Great Bend. Only when they had gained Berber would they again have any *bona fide* relevance. The fact of the matter is that while Wolseley's appreciation and plan stipulated that a force of 5,000 men would be required to effect the relief of Khartoum, the slow progress of whaler-borne operations served to reduce his effective fighting strength to a paltry 1,800. The last whaler-borne troops did not embark at Gemai until 19 December.³ In this seemingly insignificant footnote to the story of the campaign is to be found the true measure of just how slow and unsuited to its purpose the Nile route would prove in the end: troops which it had been intended would fight in a decisive battle just outside Khartoum did not get clear of Wādī Halfā, ('Bloody Halfway' to the troops), until the week before Christmas. If all that the whaler-scheme achieved in the end was to hurl

¹ Ibid, 261.

² Ibid, 261-2.

³ Colville, OH, i, 132.

the Desert Column over a desert march of 174 miles against Metemmeh, then it achieved nothing that could not have been achieved at a much earlier point in time; and time, as Butler rightly pointed out, was 'all important'. How much more difficult could it have been to march Stewart's command over 245 miles of desert from Suakin and hurl it against a less well protected Berber instead?

Let us turn now to the second of Wolseley's novel expedients. Conceptually speaking the Camel Corps was a brigade-sized force of mounted infantry. A doctrine note entitled *Notes for the Use of Camel Regiments by the General Commanding in Chief in Egypt*, which was conceived by Wolseley and signed by Buller, stated plainly in its fourth paragraph, 'The soldiers of the Camel Regiments will fight only on foot.' It went on to say:

The men of the Camel Corps must therefore trust solely to themselves and their weapons when once they have dismounted for action.

This cannot be too strongly impressed upon the men. If we have to fight in the Sudan, we must expect to meet an enemy far outnumbering us, and who may at first charge recklessly home, apparently regardless of the intense fire we bring to bear upon him. His arms are immeasurably inferior to ours, and to hurl back with heavy loss any such rush of undisciplined Arabs, we have only to keep in close formation that will give him no opening, while at the same time it enables us to give full development to our fire.¹

That two of the four regiments in the brigade were made up of cavalrymen unversed in the infantry drill was asking for trouble. In the event it was the unfortunate Heavies who paid the price. The Guards and Mounted Infantry performed well, demonstrating that the employment of composite regiments was not a particular hindrance *per se*. The real issue was using the wrong arm in the wrong role, where there was no compelling necessity to do so. That decision too had been Wolseley's.

It might also be added that mounting large numbers of troops on camels proved in the end to be of little utility. The rate of advance for a camel-borne column was not determined by the riding-camels, but by the baggage-train and this moved no faster than a marching infantryman. It is probably true to say that marching rather than riding would have exacted a greater toll on the troops in terms of dehydration. On the other hand, dismounting the Camel Corps for the crossing of the Bayūda would have provided an additional 2,000 baggage-animals, so that a great deal more water could have been carried in tanks in any case. The measure would also have obviated the need for the shuttle-run to Jakdul Wells and thus have conveyed four significant advantages. First, British intent would not have been compromised in advance and there would not have been a strong enemy blocking force at Abu Klea. Second, the transit of the Bayūda would have been completed a week earlier. Third, Stewart would not have immobilised his command by driving his animals into the ground. Fourth, there would have been sufficient baggage-camels both to support a number of follow-on infantry battalions and still permit the maintenance of a reserve. Writing in his journal on 11 January, Sir Charles Wilson observed, 'It would be heresy to say the

¹ Ibid, i, 240-3.

camelry [sic] is a mistake; but if Tommy Atkins cannot march in such a climate as this, we had better give up fighting.’¹ To prove his point the Royal Irish Regiment did indeed march across the Bayūda on foot, but by then the campaign had backfired. The Camel Corps: novel expedient or resource intensive novelty? The answer is only too painfully apparent.

8.6.2 Campaign Management

Leaving aside the validity of a Camel Corps, it is clear that the Desert Column was provided with too few baggage-camels. Traditionally, this critical shortfall is fixed at around a thousand animals and is laid at the door of Sir Redvers Buller. We have seen, however, that Buller urged Wolseley to order a crossing of the Bayūda as early as the first week of November. It is probably no coincidence that the Ring’s best brain, Brackenbury, was working under Buller at this juncture. If Buller’s private correspondence is to be believed, Wolseley was so adamant that he intended going all the way to Khartoum by river, that the army staff, from which he separated himself for more than 8 weeks, paid scant regard to the Korti-Metemmeh option. Buller learned that an overland dash was in the offing only days before it was mounted, by which time it was far too late to procure any more camels. It is the commander’s duty to convey his intent to the chief of staff, so the confusion and the consequent shortage of camels was attributable to Wolseley not Buller. An easy fix, that of dismounting the camel corps and marching across the Bayūda, was at hand, but, as Sir Charles Wilson put it, advancing such a proposition would have been to speak ‘heresy’.

Wolseley had every right to expect that his chief of staff would be the master of the expedition’s administrative nitty-gritty, although a good commander should always be certain that all is well in the logistic domain. The operation was critically dependent on the river steamers plying the lower reaches of the Nile. Unfortunately it did not dawn on Buller that they were devouring coal. There was already a contract for its provision in place when he arrived on the Nile,² but he failed to staff check usage and shortages arose. It was estimated that the coal difficulties imposed delays amounting to about 10-14 days. Buller, then, must bear some share of operational level culpability; logically it would be 5-7 times greater than Sir Charles Wilson’s purported share. At the same time, it must be recognized that Buller, most likely with Brackenbury’s help, (no more than a reflection of how an army staff works), hit the nail on the head at the correct decision point, when on 7 November he wrote to his commander urging that the river axis be terminated at Korti.

Turning particularly to the matter of key decision-points, it is possible readily to identify two. Unfortunately Wolseley missed the first of them and bungled the second. If it was apparent to Buller and Brackenbury, as early as 7 November, that proceeding via Abū-Hamed and Berber could not possibly serve to effect the relief of Khartoum in time, it should have been even more obvious to the army commander. In delaying as long as he did before finally deciding to launch Stewart across the Bayūda, Wolseley missed a vital decision-point. A key part of generalship is not merely taking decisions,

¹ Wilson, *Korti to Khartum*, 11.

² Arranged by Dormer, Stephenson’s chief of staff.

but working out in advance the latest date by which they must have been taken if a course of action is to remain tenable. It is a fundamental of military history that there have been no 'great captains' who were not masters of time and space. The second key decision-point was not a natural one, but rather was self-imposed. It occurred with the arrival on New Year's Eve of Gordon's last message. Wolseley wrote in his journal that he went to bed that night, 'with a heavy heart – Oh God how heavy!'¹ Perhaps what he should have said was that he went to bed racked by uncertainty. In the same entry he notes that he has made the decision to switch four battalions of infantry to the desert route, leaving only two battalions to proceed to Abū-Hamed and beyond in the whalers. This was predicated on Gordon's injunction, as Wolseley put it, 'not to advance unless I am strong'. It was by no means a bad precept, albeit actually bringing the infantry up would have been time-consuming, due to the backing-up effect on the river. He envisaged leaving one battalion to garrison Metemmeh, before advancing on Khartoum with the Camel Corps and the other three battalions. He observed that, 'This will be a safer plan of operation than I had previously determined upon but it will take more time & prevent me perhaps from being in Khartoum as I had hoped to be with a fighting force on the 31st Jany., [sic] at latest.' Importantly this new scheme of manoeuvre would not have precluded a rapid advance by a leading echelon based around the Camel Corps.

When Wolseley rose the next morning, he wavered. By the end of the day he was no longer intent on leading a dash across the Bayūda, but had become fixated instead on Gordon's injunction, 'Do not leave Berber in your rear'. His answer to this particular conundrum was to leave the infantry on the boats, as originally intended, and mount a much slower-moving pincer movement on Berber. The Desert Column would advance to Metemmeh as planned but, instead of immediately dashing south for Khartoum, would first despatch Wilson to confer with Gordon. Only when Wilson returned to Korti would Wolseley decide whether to launch Stewart to the north or to the south. Earle's four battalions would be committed to rowing all the way to Berber after all. From being momentarily relevant, they had once again been consigned to irrelevance. Crucially Wilson's mission represented a new and necessarily time-consuming phase in the Desert Column's scheme of manoeuvre.

Even more remarkable than the dithering was the fact that the orders subsequently issued to Stewart and Wilson made no provision for them deciding anything themselves. Even if Wilson had made it to Khartoum and back safely, and on disembarking at Metemmeh had reported that Gordon was indeed *in extremis*, Stewart did not have the authority either to march south immediately, or to throw troops aboard the steamers for a second more powerful river dash. Whether or not he would have taken the responsibility upon himself is not something we can ever know. That a dire necessity to take urgent action might have been in play was surely obvious, yet Wolseley made no allowance for it. Instead of conceding some independence of action, he issued orders which expressly instructed Wilson to come back to Korti and make his report in person. Wolseley would then have had to cross the Bayūda in the opposite direction, if he was to assume personal command of the Desert Column's southwards advance. If everything had gone well for Wilson, the necessity for him to

¹ Wolseley, journal entry 31 Dec 84; see Preston (ed.), *Relief of Gordon*, 103.

go to Khartoum, confer with Gordon and come back to Metemneh at low-Nile would still have consumed a minimum of nine days. When at length he did cross the Bayūda to Korti, it took him four days.¹ Add the same again for Wolseley's crossing, plus a minimum of 4-5 days for him to give his orders and forge across the last 100 miles to the city, and we are safely three weeks from the date at which the Desert Column gained the river.

Lord Wolseley gave no orders which suggested that there was a not a second to be lost in getting Wilson to Khartoum. Indeed the orders issued to Stewart, Wilson and Beresford gave no guidance whatsoever on the urgency of the situation.² What Wolseley might have said to them face-to-face we do not know, but both Wilson and Beresford wrote comprehensive memoirs which make no mention of any separate exhortation to speed. Even more compellingly, if Wolseley had actually given any such orders, we can be certain that he would have ranted about it in his campaign journal, his letters home or his correspondence with Hartington. Ultimately, if Wolseley had intended to convey any dire necessity for speed, it was necessary that it be clearly articulated in the written orders.

8.7 THE TACTICAL LEVEL OF COMMAND

Chapters 6 and 7 established that by the time Sir Herbert Stewart was launched into the Bayūda there was nothing that could be done at the tactical level to secure operational level success. Nonetheless, mistakes were made which ought to be addressed here for the sake of completeness. Stewart was a natural leader and a gallant soldier. Realising the urgency of the situation he pressed his command hard during his desert marches. However, in moving at such speed, with so little care and attention to the well-being of his animals, he ruined the very transport asset which was meant to convey his force to Khartoum.³ He did not have enough camels to begin with and knew there were no more coming up the lines of communication.

At Abu Klea Stewart did not intentionally bypass the main enemy position, as he claimed in his official despatch.⁴ In fact it was Burnaby who kept the square clear of the *khôr* on the British left.⁵ The use of skirmishers around the square was ordered by Stewart and served to negate Burnaby's good work up to that point. Lord Charles Beresford has been unfairly blamed for the enemy breaking into the square. In fact it was Beresford who took it upon himself to sound the halt, who drew Stewart's attention to the disarray at the rear and who set about putting things straight.⁶ The Gardner was not outside the left-rear corner of the square, as many secondary narratives have asserted, but not far from the centre of the left face,⁷ a matter of only yards in front of the riflemen to its rear. The gun played no part in facilitating the

¹ Wilson, *Korti to Khartum*, 274.

² Colvile, OH, ii, 7-10.

³ See for example observations on the condition and treatment of the camels made by Wilson (*Korti to Khartum*, 95-7) and Marling (*Rifleman and Hussar*, 131-2).

⁴ Colvile, OH, ii, 257.

⁵ Snow MS.

⁶ Beresford, *Memoirs*, i, 262.

⁷ Beresford, *Proceedings of the Naval Brigade*; see the *London Gazette*, 28 Apr. 85.

enemy break-in, save in so far as it jammed at a particularly inopportune moment, something which it might have done at any juncture. Beresford did not break or meaningfully disrupt the British ranks as has been suggested.¹

It has always been portrayed that the square was broken into at its left-rear corner. Latterly the realisation that the problems at the rear of the square were created by the British themselves has driven some historians to regard the assertion that the anṣār 'broke a British square', (a phrase derived from Kipling's verse), to be misleading. In the course of this research, however, it has become clear that there was a second and earlier penetration, in the centre of the left face. This was brought about by direct shock-action. Thus the British square at Abu Klea was indeed broken. The disarray at the left rear of the square, frequently referred to in secondary accounts, had in fact been corrected, albeit in the very nick of time, when the Heavies' feeble grasp on the infantry drill exerted a disastrous effect. As the enemy closed in, the cavalymen in the left face not only failed to lock themselves in shoulder-to-shoulder, but began stepping backwards as they fired. This weakened the British line fatally. Worse still, the Royal Dragoons failed to take station in the rear face and took it upon themselves to extend the left face. Although Burnaby was not responsible for the ill-advised actions of the Royals, he did compound a gross error by ordering another half-company to conform to the movement. While Burnaby is not directly or solely to blame for the fact that there was costly hand to hand fighting at Abu Klea, he did nothing to help the situation. In riding forward of the troops, to fight at close quarters with his sword, he can be considered to have thrown up his rank and responsibilities. Gallant it may have been; the act of a senior officer it was not.

Stewart's decision to march all night and keep pressing for the river in daylight cost him 10% of his stores and baggage-train, and exhausted his command. Its most destructive effect was that he had not secured his administrative echelon within a tenable defensive perimeter before the enemy closed in. As a result the advance of the fighting echelon was long delayed by the necessity to fortify the zariba under fire. This led to approximately 70 unnecessary casualties. Sir Charles Wilson had twice attempted to forestall this unfortunate scenario, by urging Stewart not to execute a night march in the first place, and later urging him to halt at a safe distance from Metemmeh.² In the former scenario, the Battle of Metemmeh would have been fought on the morning of 20 January, to a deliberate battle plan prepared the previous afternoon, with the benefit of reconnaissance. In the latter scenario, the Wilson plan would have seen a rested and revitalised British force fighting the Battle of Metemmeh at about one o'clock on the nineteenth, which is to say three hours *before* the real-world Battle of Abu Kru reached its climax. The costly delay prior to the advance at Abu Kru, laid by some of the Camel Corps bluebloods at Wilson's door, was not of his making but of Stewart's.

Sir Charles Wilson was a surveyor by profession and had no command experience to draw upon. While he possessed many of the attributes of a good field soldier, not least courage, determination and intelligence, he was not well qualified by experience to command a field force. He was possessed of sufficient humility to know

¹ See for example Keown-Boyd, *A Good Dusting*, 50.

² Wilson, *Korti to Khartum*, 48, 51-2 & 58-9.

that this was so; a lesser man might have drawn on the naked authority of his rank to pretend otherwise; to act a part or to bluff it out. Instead, he was wise enough during his short tenure in command to consult with the other senior officers and leading members of the brigade staff, many of whom had accrued considerable operational experience. While there was a future field marshal in the background, (Major French), there was nobody amongst the lieutenant colonels who leaps from the historical record as an officer who would undoubtedly have done a better job, perhaps not least because it is doubtful whether the job could actually have been done any better.

8.8 INTRODUCTION TO CHAPTER 9

The final chapter will identify examples of 'lessons learned' in the domains of Campaign Design and Campaign Management. It will then itemise the accusations laid at Wilson's door by his critics and comment on their respective merits, by way of a final adjudication of the 'Wilson Controversy'. At the end of those two steps we will have arrived at the answer to the research question posed on the title page. The chapter will conclude with a synopsis of the contribution to knowledge made by this thesis and will offer recommendations for further research.

Chapter 9

SUMMARY OF CONCLUSIONS

9.1 GENERAL

The discursive chapters have probed the allegations levelled against Sir Charles Wilson and identified why they arose in the first place. It seems to me that none of them have any bona fide substance and that the evidence that Wilson was falsely accused on all counts is compelling. A point by point repudiation of the accusations is given at the next section, by way of summarizing where each line of enquiry led. If there were indeed failings at the tactical level of command, then the discursive chapters might have served to leave Sir Herbert Stewart's reputation in a less exalted place than formerly. This is not to suggest that he was not a gallant and able officer, for he was assuredly both of these things. It is also clear that at no point did Stewart have it in his gift to save Gordon, any more than Wilson did.

Getting fewer than 30 servicemen to Khartoum on the morning of Wednesday 28 January 1885 cost the British Empire hugely disproportionate quantities of blood and treasure. This thesis has contended that in contemplating the Gordon Relief Expedition history has been tricked into a broadly superficial set of conclusions, not least in respect of its casual acceptance of the premise that Wolseley's campaign amounted to a near miss. Chapters 5, 6 and 7 have demonstrated that it was nothing of the sort. The expedition was a failure, a heroic failure perhaps, but a failure nonetheless. Moreover it cannot be said to have come remotely close to being a success. In essence a defective campaign plan entirely of his own design had compelled Wolseley to enter the decisive phase of operations with far too little combat power, far too late in time and space. Inexcusably he wasted the larger part of the force assigned to him, rendering the Herculean logistic endeavours to move and feed the troops all but nugatory. The Grand Conception, bold and ambitious though it may have been, was logistically impractical due to the huge distances the hard-pressed baggage camels would have been required to cover. More fundamentally it served to derail Wolseley's Campaign Management by causing him to lose focus on his only legitimate Campaign Objective. It is remarkable that he failed even to grasp that it was the advance across the Bayūda which would constitute the decisive phase of operations. If the Desert Column cannot be said to have been defeated in the conventional sense of the word, it was certainly fought to a standstill and by the end of the third week in January was in no sort of condition to effect the relief of Khartoum, even if by some miracle the opportunity to do so had been available for another month. Had a hypothetical Battle of Omdurman been fought against the full military might of Mahdism by fewer than a thousand British bayonets, it would assuredly have resulted in disaster. The plain fact of the matter is that the salvation of Khartoum was never a matter of two days here or there. To endorse the notion that the timely arrival of Wilson's party would have saved the city, while 99.72% of the relief expedition was

quite incapable of coming up for another two months, is no more than to perpetuate an unsavoury cover-up.

9.2 'LESSONS LEARNED'

It was observed in the introduction that if the veiled truths of the Khartoum Campaign could be exposed it would assume great utility as a campaign planning case-study. By way of illustration the following synopsis incorporates a proportion of the lessons which might reasonably be derived and utilised for instructional purposes.

CAMPAIGN DESIGN

It is possible to overdesign a campaign in some dimensions and under-design it in others. The Nile Expedition would likely have worked well had there been a go-decision in April, but was always going to be an uphill struggle when four months later it had to cope with so constrained a window in time and space. Wellington once said of the French commanders in the Peninsular War, 'They planned their campaigns just as you might make a splendid piece of harness. It looks very well; and answers very well until it gets broken; and then you are done for. Now I made my campaign of ropes. If anything went wrong, I tied a knot and went on.' Wellington's metaphor admirably encapsulates the essential difference between the Nile Expedition, as it eventually played itself out, and the 'make-do-and-mend' options urged by Sir Frederick Stephenson. Both the Suakin-Berber axis, and his second choice plan – utilising *nuggars* to begin moving troops as rapidly as possible towards Dongola and Debbeh while the Nile was still high – would have represented a 'campaign of ropes.' In other words, the difficulties could probably have been worked through, without the same fatal loss of time occasioned by waiting for the whalers to be built, transported and passed in such large numbers through so many bottlenecks. Stephenson's Nile plan would have achieved everything and more that Wolseley's did, by concentrating a strong brigade at Korti at a much earlier point in time and space.

It is possible to jump too soon in selecting a 'best' course of action. Wolseley erred by failing to keep his Campaign Design options open until the point at which he would have to jump one way or the other. Very little time and attention was devoted to exploring the viability of the Suakin-Berber axis before it was ruled out by Wolseley and the Ring, though ministers, to their credit, remained more open-minded for longer. Wolseley's position then became entrenched. The better practice would have been to task one of his best thinkers and a supporting team to work up a Suakin-Berber option in parallel with the Nile plan. This was impact free and would have facilitated adaptation in the event of political procrastination. That Wolseley always knew that Suakin-Berber was not wholly impracticable, as he had briefed to

Hartington in April, is proved by his subsequent but little known offer of May to command any expedition which the government saw fit to send by that axis.

Planning factors do not constitute a common currency but must be weighted according to circumstance and afforded the prominence which is their due. The primary planning factor for the Khartoum operation should have been reconciliation of time and space. Because this consideration was not afforded the proper weighting, the process of selecting the best course of action went awry.

Local knowledge and advice, especially that of an in-place headquarters, will always be worthy of contemplation, will more often than not be sound and should on no account be glibly or lightly overturned in Whitehall. GOC Cairo did not have a defective grasp of the problem as Wolseley suggested. All of Stephenson's advice to the War Office was sound. He was superseded, in the end, for being right and having the moral courage to demur from a plan he felt certain would fail to attain its object.

A campaign plan must incorporate flexibility. Today 'flexibility' is a principle of war. The inherent inflexibility of a commander placing reliance exclusively on a river axis is obvious. In most operations it will also immediately overturn two other principles of war, those of 'surprise' and 'security'. Sir Samuel Baker, who knew the region better than anybody else in London, had advocated advancing on three axes simultaneously.¹ While a third axis may have made the operation too resource intensive, a combination of the Nile and the Suakin-Berber caravan road would have conveyed greater flexibility. Because neither the Nile axis nor the caravan road were capable of sustaining 10,000 men and several thousand camels, there was a good case to be made for dividing the effort across two axes, thereby spreading the logistic burden. As it turned out exclusive reliance on the Nile axis resulted in only one-fifth of the assigned force being brought to bear on the attainment of the Campaign Objective.

The levels of warfare must not be allowed to become too closely conjoined too quickly. Wolseley was the Secretary of State's principal military adviser at the strategic level. He defaulted almost immediately to operational level Campaign Design, which he would have regarded as a personal forte. Once the campaign plan had become 'his', there was nobody above him to stand back and counsel the Secretary of State as to the merits of the developing plan compared with alternative courses of action.

¹ Colvile, OH, i, 35.

CAMPAIGN MANAGEMENT

Staff officers must display moral courage during the Campaign Review process. We have seen that Buller had correctly concluded as early as 7 November that advancing into the Great Bend no longer had any validity. Nonetheless there are no suggestions that any difficult or heated discussion occurred at the Wādī Halfā meeting of 17 November. Ultimately the chief of staff was right and the commander wrong. On the face of it Buller would appear to have let the matter go too lightly.

OPSEC is all very well but there can never be an excuse in the course of a manoeuvre operation for the commander not sharing his intent with his chief of staff. This will be so self-evident to the modern military practitioner as to have virtually no utility as a lesson learned. The remarkable thing is that it actually happened on the Nile. Self-evident or not, it will likely happen again in the future and will likely be attended by the same dismal consequences.

The enemy factor must be afforded the appropriate degree of respect. This of course is one of the 'classic' lessons of military history. The Mahdīst enemy proved powerful, agile, aggressive and competent: the rout of the Egyptian military between 1881-4 provided ample warning to that effect. They did not wait supinely at Khartoum to be dispersed by the mere arrival of British soldiers, but instead advanced into the desert to interdict the British in their approach march. This was not something which had been anticipated. In short the enemy will always be a player and only very rarely a spectator.

A commander's powers of leadership, decision-making and control can be compromised through poor positioning in the battlespace. In the early stages of his campaign, Wolseley was too far forward and spent most of his time waiting for his troops to come up. Had he been co-located with his chief of staff and main headquarters, he would have been better placed to control the advance, stay abreast of logistic complications and talk through major decision-points in advance. When the campaign entered its decisive phase he acceded to the Secretary of State's request that he remain at the end of the telegraph. As a consequence he lost touch with the contact battle and with it control of the campaign. Several successive sets of orders sent to Buller once he had assumed command of the Desert Column had been overtaken by events to an almost embarrassing extent. Remarkably Wolseley spent the greater part of his campaign mal-located; too far forward to begin with and too far back when the crunch came.

Ethically a commander should avoid delegating responsibility but can and should delegate authority. That Wolseley should have remained so far to the rear was a misjudgement. He compounded it by failing in his written orders to delegate appropriate levels of authority to Stewart.

Orders must articulate intent plainly. In the aftermath of defeat Wolseley was to behave as if the orders he had given had been resonant with the vital necessity to maintain a high tempo of operations. In fact they did not include a single reference to any need for urgency.

9.3 ADJUDICATING THE WILSON CONTROVERSY

Chapter 4 described the components and sequence of the Wilson Controversy between 1885 and the 1930s. The literature review at Chapter 2 demonstrated that ill-founded assertions have continued to be made down to our own time. What follows is a synopsis of findings which in the interests of clarity are unequivocally stated, but have been painstakingly and objectively arrived at. The various accusations levelled at Sir Charles Wilson are itemised in bold font and commented upon at the ensuing subparagraphs.

Wilson procrastinated for some hours at Abu Kru before ordering an advance, as a result of which unnecessary loss of life and heavy casualties occurred.

The dire tactical situation at Abu Kru was of Stewart's making not Wilson's. It arose when Stewart pursued two particular courses of action, from both of which Wilson had attempted to dissuade him. The first was the decision to march for the Nile by night, which necessarily entailed not watering the camels at Abu Klea, and thus allowed the force no loiter time in the desert, in which to reconnoitre its optimal course of action before Metemmeh. The second was the decision to keep pressing forward in daylight, after the night-march had miscarried, without first feeding and resting the troops at a safe distance from the enemy. As a result the British force found itself invested in a poor defensive position.

General Stewart continued to play a command role even after he had been wounded. It was he who urged the necessity to stand fast and await an enemy attack.

There was a council of war at the hospital-fort, involving Wilson, Beresford and the column's commanding officers, which decided not to make any forward move before 2.00 *pm*. The decision was a collective one.

It was operationally vital to fortify a poor defensive position, so that it could be held by a small guard force in the protracted absence of the fighting echelon.

The work of fortifying the position with the commissariat stores and camel-saddles took from approximately 11.15-14.00, due to the extreme

difficulty of getting around amongst baggage-camels which had been jammed in serried ranks, onto a small knoll exposed to heavy enemy fire.

At or shortly after 2.00 *pm* Wilson went to Stewart to tell him that he intended to advance in square. The general tried to dissuade him from doing so, but Wilson rejected the advice and proceeded as planned.

The square set out at about 3.00 *pm*, which was a reflection of the time it took for the guard force to redistribute itself around the perimeter and for successive infantry companies to move to the forming-up-place under fire and lie down in cover, pending completion of the formation.

In reality, Wilson extricated the command from a tactically fraught situation and proceeded both to rout a powerful enemy force of 10-12,000 men, and to secure a lodgement on the Nile by sunset.

Wilson commanded by committee.

Captain Lord Charles Beresford RN was formally senior to Wilson. Though he contentedly and properly ceded command, he seems not to have fought shy of offering his opinions subsequently.

Wilson was an intelligent man, recognized his lack of command experience and practised a noticeably more consultative command style than had General Stewart before him. Stewart on the other hand was Wolseley's favourite protégé: thus he was widely regarded as one of the best officers in the Army and had been schooled in the 'personal' style of command, in which a GOC directly controls and decides almost everything. It was inevitable that the difference between Stewart and Wilson would be palpable.

The individuals listed by Lieutenant Marling in his accusation of 'command by committee' actually comprised a standard brigade orders group. Marling was a junior company officer and can have had little direct knowledge of how the column's senior officers interacted in terms of tactical decision-making. Too many historians have latched onto Marling's remarks without properly contemplating their context.

That Wilson handed executive command of the square over to CO GCR for the fight to the Nile was no more than a reflection of a tactical norm. Stewart had not exercised executive command of the square at Abu Klea either. Marling's assertion that 'he [Wilson] knows nothing about drill' was correct, but has to be understood as a reference to 'the infantry drill', which is to say the close control and manoeuvring of infantry on the battlefield.

Wilson's operation against Metemmeh on 21 January was feebly commanded, ineptly executed, was not pressed to a conclusion when it ought to have been and 'encouraged' the enemy.

Wilson took a bold decision to attack Metemmeh at the earliest possible opportunity and proceeded to do so.

He identified that the best avenue of approach was from the north. He had a workable plan and was steering the force towards mounting an attack along his preferred avenue of approach, when the actions of others derailed the plan.

It was Boscawen who manoeuvred the force to the south in Wilson's absence, in the mistaken belief that the enemy was about to counter-thrust towards the British lodgement. The purported threat now obliged Wilson to keep his force interposed between the town and his lightly defended administrative echelon. There were officers present who knew that the threat had no substance, but nobody told Wilson.

Metemmeh was larger, more populous and better fortified than the British had been led to believe. There were not fewer than 3,000 Mahdīst fighters inside its walls. Carrying it by storm would have entailed fighting house-to-house and would inevitably have resulted in casualty levels the depleted British force could no longer afford. The town wall was not breached by artillery bombardment, as the available ordnance was insufficiently heavy. To have assaulted a defended, loopholed and intact town wall would have amounted to an act of culpable negligence.

The arrival of Gordon's steamers at the height of the operation altered the higher level situation, by making the next Decisive Condition in Wolseley's adapted plan immediately attainable. The steamers also brought in the intelligence that the Faqī Muṣṭafa's force was only 18 miles to the south. This meant that the vulnerable British lodgement, housing the force's stores, transport and more than 100 wounded men, might be attacked that afternoon. The decision to break off and fall back on the lodgement was the only one possible in the circumstances.

There is no evidence to suggest that the Mahdīsts were in any way encouraged by the British disengagement. In fact they remained on the back foot for some time. The steamers, under Wilson's personal command, took offensive action the following day, engaging Metemmeh and throwing 60 shells into Shendy. The enemy later harassed the British position at Gubat, but it was never attacked in force.

The enemy position in Metemmeh presented no bar to communicating with Gordon, in compliance with Wolseley's intent. Capturing the town could be deferred until the arrival of reinforcements made it a more realistic proposition. For the immediate future, capturing Metemmeh was not an operationally vital imperative.

Wilson delayed unnecessarily for two days at Gubat before embarking aboard the steamers.

Wolseley had not issued any orders which stipulated that a steamer dash was to be executed without delay. Its object was to communicate with Gordon, not to relieve Khartoum. The reason behind it was Wolseley's desire for certainty as to just how long Gordon could hold out. He had deferred his next critical command decision until he had obtained an answer; the price in lost time for this indecision would have been in excess of 20 days.

Wilson was Wolseley's nominated emissary due to his personal relationship with Gordon: fate had dictated that he also became the force commander in the interim. There were conflicting imperatives inherent in the two roles.

Sending steamers through the 20-mile long Sixth Cataract in late January was a high-risk proposition and far more dangerous than Wolseley ever appreciated. Wilson had the benefit of the advice of the steamer captains and their pilots and knew that the potential for disaster was high. That he proceeded anyway and led the enterprise in person is to his credit.

January 22 was devoted to upstream and downstream reconnaissance, in order to confirm the veracity of intelligence to the effect that two powerful Mahdīst forces were converging on the British lodgement. Failure to establish the facts, or leaving the force to be attacked in the commander's absence, would once again have amounted to culpable negligence. The downstream reconnaissance was not completed until sunset. Wilson also mounted a short bombardment of rebel-held Shendy during the course of the day.

It had been Wilson's intention that the steamers would depart at about midday on 23 January. There were three things to be accomplished before they set out; merging four mixed Egyptian and Sudanese crews into two all-Sudanese ones; servicing the engines; and gathering in an adequate supply of firewood for the boilers. Beresford's official report stated that his artificers went on board the previous day, but he later acknowledged that the assertion was erroneous. It had always been Wolseley's intention that the vessels be overhauled, which was precisely why the Naval Brigade was present. He had also intended that the vessels be taken over by British crews, but all Beresford's officers had been killed or wounded, while he was himself unfit for duty.

Reorganizing the in situ crews proved time-consuming. Fuel (firewood) was now hard to come by on this stretch of the Nile, as a result of three steamers having loitered there since October. The decision to defer the departure to the following morning was reluctantly taken, in mid-afternoon, when it became clear that the ongoing preparations could not be completed before sunset.

Had Wilson set out from Gubat at the earliest possible opportunity, Gordon would have been saved.

There is no tenable calculation which can bring Wilson to Khartoum before Gordon's death. If he had set out at the crack of dawn on the 22nd he would have arrived at the confluence some 5-6 hours after Gordon had been killed.

The British victories in the desert and their subsequent arrival at Gubat precipitated the final attack on Khartoum.

There were between 30,000 and 50,000 Mahdīst fighters at Khartoum, under a leader they believed to be heaven-sent. Even if Gordon had thrown back the attack on the night 25/26 January, the arrival of 28 British personnel was not going to change anything. The city might have been attacked the following week, when the garrison would have been utterly incapable of defending itself.

Wilson turned the steamers too early to be sure that Khartoum had fallen.

The steamers were under continuous fire for four hours. Their hulls were unprotected and they might have been sunk by a direct hit from an artillery round at any point.

Wilson and Gascoigne could see the *sarāya* with their binoculars and identified that not only had the Egyptian flag been struck, but that the houses of the wealthy on either side of the palace had been wrecked.

Gordon's 'castellated barges', or floating forts, which were always to be found at the ends of the South Front defence-line were now moored off enemy-held Omdurman.

The steamers were fired on from the city precincts.

The steamers received not a single shot of covering fire from anywhere in the battlespace.

The steamers were under a three-way crossfire from the city, Omdurman and Tuti Island when they turned, indicating that they reached the confluence of the rivers.

They could see thousands of anṣār lining the south bank of the Blue Nile, which is to say immediately in front of the built-up area and inside the South Front.

The captain of *Bordein* ordered engines stopped because it was so obvious to him that the city had fallen: even then Wilson ordered that the vessels proceed further.

Wilson came within 80 yards of making a landing on Tuti Island in the mistaken belief that the heavy firing emanating from there was covering fire directed against Omdurman. In fact it was poorly directed enemy fire flying over the steamers to accidentally strike the far side of the river.

Gascoigne's account is entitled *To Within a Mile of Khartoum* for a reason. The actual distance may have been as little as 1,000 yards, albeit this cannot be proved beyond doubt. If Gascoigne had called his account *To within a mile of Gordon's Palace* this would be consistent with them being in the mouth of the confluence when they turned.

The officers concerned were all demonstrably men of honour. Their accounts are in no way anomalous. Rather they are consistent and represent modest descriptions of what was actually one of the classically heroic actions of British military history.

The forgoing section demonstrates that it has not been possible to identify meaningful substance to any of the accusations levelled against Wilson. On the contrary, he was evidently an intelligent, able and courageous officer. It is demonstrably the case that at no point did it lie within his power to save General Gordon. In essence the so-called 'Wilson Controversy' is more about the character of General Lord Wolseley than the conduct of Colonel Sir Charles Wilson. That Wilson and his party overcame all the obstacles posed by low-Nile, to press within sight of Gordon's Palace, in the face of a heavy three-way crossfire, bespeaks great resolve, devotion to duty and valour. It is apparent that a number of VC citations could and should have followed the river dash and rescue. Such recommendations were in the gift of Lord Wolseley. None were submitted. Without the needless and inappropriate controversy, and by the standards and criteria of the day, posterity would not have batted an eyelid if Sir Charles Wilson had been awarded the Victoria Cross.

9.4 SYNOPSIS OF OPERATIONAL LEVEL REALITIES

When Khartoum fell the River Column was still approximately 51 days from Metemmeh, or not less than 60 days from Khartoum. This means that even without making any allowance for enemy opposition at Abū-Hamed and Berber, the earliest date at which the re-unified Nile Expedition could have arrived at Khartoum was around 6/7 March. The objective truth is not that the Gordon Relief Expedition was two days 'Too Late!', but that it was all but nine weeks too late.¹ If the troops, camels and stores required to mount an 1,800 man dash across the Bayūda had been moved upriver by *nuggar* while the Nile was still high, they could have been concentrated at Korti by mid-October. The whaler scheme served only to bring another 3,000 superfluous troops into terrain characterised by Wolseley himself as a 'howling wilderness'.

The Desert Column was not engaged in an all-out attempt to save Khartoum when the city fell. Stewart's orders were to gain the river at Metemmeh, marry up with the steamers and despatch Wilson with a small escort of red-coated infantrymen to exchange situation reports with General Gordon. Wilson was under orders not to leave any troops in the city and was to return as rapidly as possible to report to Lord Wolseley at Korti.² In no sense was Wilson's steamer dash meant to represent the relief of Khartoum.

Khartoum did not fall by treachery as was asserted afterwards by Gladstone and Wolseley. It fell through an inevitably fatal combination of starvation and direct assault. It was the precedent established at El Obeid which determined the Mahdī's tactical approach to the siege. The final attack could have been mounted anything up to three weeks earlier and would still have been made against an unhinged South Front and a garrison that was at the end of its tether.³ It was never a question of two days here or there. The arrival of the British at Metemmeh merely precipitated the *coup de grace*.

For Wolseley even to contemplate relieving Khartoum at any point between February and March 1885 was wholly unrealistic. In April 1884 he selected November 15 as his target date.⁴ He should have stuck by this and in August have risen to the challenge, no matter how daunting such a timeline might have appeared. Having been forced to wait so long before being able to finance any preparations he should have resolved no longer to rely on an inherently inflexible river option, but should have adopted the Suakin-Berber axis instead. The river route was not merely time-consuming at the best of times, but was unworkable at low-Nile. It is remarkable that the Ring pushed so hard for the Nile route, when virtually nothing was known in England of the river's navigability between Merowe and Berber. Wolseley should have launched a plan fit to bring a strong fighting force to bear on Khartoum by no later

¹ The estimate is solidly grounded, based as it is on a projection made by Butler to the effect that when the River Column reached the furthest limit of its advance, on 24 Feb. 85, around a month after the fall of Khartoum, it was still at least three weeks shy of gaining Metemmeh. See Butler, *Campaign of the Cataracts*, 365.

² Wilson, *Korti to Khartoum*, 300-2; Colvile, OH, ii, 7-10.

³ See Maj. H. H. Kitchener, *Notes on the Fall of Khartoum*, cited in full at Colvile, OH, ii, 270-6.

⁴ Ibid, 31.

than mid-November. This he failed to do. That he bullied Hartington and others into dismissing Suakin-Berber, subverting and supplanting GOC Cairo in the process, does not rebound to his credit.

In addition to the strategic misjudgement of proceeding with a Nile expedition so late in time and space, Wolseley made two other serious errors of judgement at the operational level. First, he missed the optimal decision-point to launch the Desert Column across the Bayūda by more than a month: even then he allowed a fifth week to pass before he saw fit to share his overdue decision to enact the contingency with his chief of staff. Second, he over-reacted to Gordon's unexplained injunction of 31 December, 'Do not leave Berber in your rear'. As a result he enacted measures which slowed the possibility of a dash to Khartoum by the Desert Column by something in the order of 21 days.

Wolseley's assertion that the blame for the fall of Khartoum could be attributed to decisions or actions taken at the tactical level is a falsehood. The vote of credit came in August. There was no tactical level of operations prior to the New Year, when Sir Herbert Stewart marched partway into the desert. His second march got underway on 8 January. By 20 January, the day after Abu Kru, the Desert Column was no longer administratively capable of dashing to Khartoum, nor was it operationally capable of winning a battle of decision in the approach to Omdurman. The reasons for this flowed from conditions set at the operational level of command. The city fell on the night 25/26 January. At no point during the second half of his campaign had Wolseley ever counted on getting to Khartoum before 31 January. Even this date was untenable. He would not actually have been in a position to relieve Khartoum until early March, which is to say more than nine weeks after the food ran out and six weeks after the cats, rats and tree-gum ran out. The garrison had been physically and morally incapable of defending the city against direct assault since the second week of January. The assertion that Sir Charles Wilson had it in his power to save General Gordon is a falsehood. Wolseley behaved unreasonably and unprofessionally in casting wholly unwarranted slurs on Wilson's conduct.

Unfortunately the Nile Expedition was conceived not only as the means of General Gordon's salvation, but also as a crowning triumph to Wolseley's career. It entailed a grandiose scheme to move a force of three brigades from Cairo to Khartoum and thence to Suakin. Wolseley's reticence to see concurrent operations mounted in the Red Sea Littoral sprang from the fact that he intended to add to the lustre of saving Gordon, by defeating Osman Digna and the eastern rebels on the way home. The adoption of the Nile axis was sound in April but untenable by August. If at that point he had executed his original scheme of manoeuvre in reverse, marching to meet the whalers as his means of getting home, it might conceivably have worked. In the event the greater part of his deployed force was never brought to bear and he failed to attain either of his campaign objectives, only one of which enjoyed legitimacy.

9.5 ENDNOTE

For all that the Gordon Relief Expedition was characterised by a small number of fundamental and irrecoverable errors of judgement on the part of the army

commander, (as well as by the incredible courage and determination of the men at the sharp end of the proceedings – British, Egyptian, loyalist Sudanese and Mahdist Sudanese alike), it is only fair to reflect by way of a closing thought that what Wolseley was up against, ultimately, was the Sudan itself. ‘When God made the Sudan,’ the saying goes, ‘he laughed.’ Faced with the same set of conundrums it is distinctly likely that Wolseley’s great hero, Robert E. Lee, would also have struggled. But if Wolseley had been more attentive during his pilgrimage to the Army of Northern Virginia, he would have learned that truly ‘great captains’ are not in the habit of passing the buck. There is no better example than Lee’s acceptance of responsibility for the ill-conceived third day attack on the Union centre at Gettysburg. And what, by way of a final thought, can be said of the essence of the campaign conundrum, except that surely there can be no better illustration of the modern day British Army adage, ‘A good plan today is better than a perfect plan tomorrow’.

9.6 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

9.6.1 Archaeological

The Battlefield at Abu Klea is much easier to interpret than that at Abu Kru, in large part because the ground is constrained, it was properly mapped by Verner and there are still artefacts, such as cartridge-cases, lying on the surface. Abu Kru on the other hand is nothing like as easy to fix, as it is located in flat, open desert and is much more windblown, as a result of which no artefacts are to be found above ground level. Whilst I would place 100% confidence in my identifications of key locations at Abu Klea, the figure would tail away to something in the order of 95% in the case of Abu Kru. Both battlefields would benefit from full archaeological survey and interpretation. Similarly Mernat Island and the battlefields of the Red Sea Littoral would also benefit from professional archaeological survey.

9.6.2 Historical

The present project has dissected the design and management of Wolseley’s last campaign and has exposed a number of insights into flaws in his generalship and persona. Much of the ground covered here is not presently embraced by the existing historiography of the era. It has not been possible to take a wider look at how failure on the Nile fits with the rest of Wolseley’s career, nor is it desirable to draw conclusions on his rightful place in history on the basis of only one campaign; the dangers of imbalance or distortion are obvious. Because no previous biography has contemplated all the issues raised here, and the number of Wolseley biographies is surprisingly small in any case, there is a good case to be made for a modern biography which trims away any last vestiges of high-Victorian hype, much of which originated with men who owed their rank and standing to Wolseley. The present project makes no attempt to offer an opinion as to whether Wolseley should or should not be regarded as one of the ‘great captains’ of the nineteenth century. His previous campaigns certainly incorporated moments of brilliance, while, on the other hand,

nothing he did on the Nile would point towards his being an outstanding general. It would be impossible to resolve this apparent contradiction without a wider review of his generalship from 1870 onwards. The natural home for such a review is a new biography.

Sir Herbert Stewart has never been afforded a full-length biography but was sufficiently prominent in the British Army of his day to more than warrant one. Much of the material provided here would facilitate such a project.

In similar vein the 'Wolseley Ring' as a collective would benefit from re-appraisal. It has, for instance, been argued here that there are several demonstrable instances of Wolseley backing poor horses, Colley and Buller being perhaps the most obvious examples. Stewart also made enough mistakes across the Majuba, 1st Suakin and Bayūda campaigns to call into question whether it is altogether justifiable to think of him as one of the most outstanding officers of his generation, an epitaph devised by Wolseley, but not something which would appear to be sustained by any great weight of evidence.

To counterbalance Anglocentric interpretations of the Mahdīya, there would be great merit in an Arabic-speaking researcher trawling the Egyptian and Sudanese national archives in order to collate a collection or directory of non-European participant accounts relating to the battles and campaigns of the 1880s. While the great majority of Sudanese tribesmen were illiterate, there were also merchant, clerical and elite classes which were not, although it is also true that it was far from commonplace for the well-educated to go fighting in the desert. It would seem likely, therefore, that the quest would fail to repay a quantitatively large dividend, but even limited success would have the potential to prove genuinely illuminating.

9.7 SYNOPSIS OF CONTRIBUTION TO KNOWLEDGE

This research has shown that:

- a. Contrary to popular perception Wolseley's campaign plan did not fail to deliver troops to Khartoum by a margin of two days, but rather by one of 60 days. The project has proved beyond reasonable doubt that the campaign cannot in any sense be interpreted as the narrow miss of legend.
- b. The reason this was so was that Wolseley worked up a sound course of action at the outset, but then failed to adapt to redefined parameters of time and space by shifting to what had formerly been his second best course of action.
- c. Wolseley devised and kept secret an unendorsed Campaign Objective which would see him adding to the lustre of relieving Gordon, by marching to the sea and crushing Osman Digna's rebellion in the Red Sea Littoral. Its purpose was to grandstand his credentials as one of the 'great captains' of the age. Instead it served only as a distraction from his legitimate primary objective.

d. Contrary to popular belief the Desert Column was not engaged in a dash for Khartoum when time ran out.

e. The Suakin-Berber caravan road *was* militarily and logistically viable for the scale of operations required and could have delivered at least 2 brigades to Khartoum in good time to cooperate with the garrison in driving away the rebels.

f. Wolseley offered to command a Suakin-Berber expedition when he believed the government would come down against a Nile expedition, demonstrating that his later denunciations of the route were disingenuous.

g. The steamer dash was not conceived or perceived at the time as representing the relief of Khartoum. Literature which portrays it as such enshrines a fundamental mistruth.

h. Nothing Sir Charles Wilson could have done would have saved General Gordon. He has been scapegoated not merely by Wolseley, but has also been dealt with in an unjust and historically inappropriate fashion by a number of historians and writers subsequently.

i. Similarly there was nothing Sir Herbert Stewart could have done to affect the outcome, as the campaign was decided in terms of operational level management of time and space, well before an identifiable tactical level of operations was launched.

j. Sir Herbert Stewart failed to make consistently sound judgment-calls at the tactical level. His errors were of such an order that even if an additional fortnight had been available, the Desert Column would not have been capable of reaching Khartoum and winning a decisive victory.

k. Ultimately neither of Wolseley's much vaunted 'novel expedients', the Camel Corps and the whaler scheme, exerted any beneficial effect on the prospects of success: neither expedient achieved anything which could not have been achieved more quickly by other means.

l. Standing interpretations of the Battles of Abu Klea and Abu Kru are deficient in a number of important respects. While these have not been reflected here, for want of space, they have been captured by a complementary popular history to be published shortly.

Additionally the project resulted in the methodical exploration and interpretation of seven important but remote Anglo-Mahdīst battlefields and has secured for posterity 2,000 digital photographs, while they still remain in an unspoiled

condition. Previously no such photography existed. The project uncovered the War Diary and Orders Book¹ of the Desert Column, documents which are of the first importance in the historical record of the British Army. Finally, the project has exposed the veiled truths of the Khartoum Campaign and rendered it readily accessible as a case-study and teaching tool in the fields of campaign planning, leadership training and the art of command.

¹ NAS 02024 GD16-52-57-10-A-00118 AB.

APPENDIX A

STEWART'S NOTES ON THE SUAKIN-BERBER AXIS

Report on the Egyptian Provinces of the Sudan, Red Sea, and Equator, Compiled in the Intelligence Branch, Quartermaster General's Department, Horse Guards, War Office (revised to July 1884) (London, 1884)

Names of Places.	Hours of march.	Total hours of march.	Description.
Handub (1st night)	4½	4½	Leaving Suakin, the road crosses a gravelly plain covered with stunted acacias, and rises gently for some distance to Handub, where are several wells of rather brackish water. This is usually made the first halting place by caravans from Suakin. A short distance beyond this point the route enters the mountains, and, after crossing the first ridge, leads over a broad plain surrounded with hills of a volcanic origin. There are many indications of water below the surface, and a plentiful supply could probably be obtained with Abyssinian pumps.
Otao	4½	9½	Here are some wells with a small quantity of water full of surface impurities. In the rainy season there is a much larger supply. After leaving Otao, the road rises with a steep gradient and follows what appears to be the bed of a mountain torrent. It leaves the ordinary caravan track to Berber, and passes more directly through the mountains. It does not, however, present any difficulties to the passage of camels or travellers on foot.
3rd Camp (2nd night)...	8½	17½	This camp was on the site of a barren hill where there was no water and little vegetation. The road then descends into a broad valley covered with green trees and shrubs. Water could no doubt be found beneath the surface. If the rain, which falls in the wet season was properly stored, the country could be made very fertile. Here and there the track crosses circular plains surrounded with volcanic hills, which appear to be the craters of extinct volcanoes. The population is small, but possesses large flocks of sheep and goats, which crowd in thousands round the few small wells that have been dug.
Galuchi (3rd night)	5	22½	There are good wells here, and the water is excellent. The trees in the vicinity give a pleasant shade. The hills around are lofty and picturesque. The road from Galuchi is very good, and could easily be made available for wheel traffic. There is a great deal of sameness about it, as it passes one broad valley after another, separated from each other by low cols.
Odros (4th night)	11½	34½	Here are several wells with good water in a narrow gorge, surrounded by hills said to be infested with robbers, who, however, would not care to attack any party of moderate size. This is one of the highest points between the Red Sea and the Nile, and has an altitude of rather more than 3,000 feet. Thence the general inclination of the road is downwards towards the Nile.
6th Camp (5th night)	11½	46	No water was obtainable here; it was necessary to bring a supply from the wells at Odros.
7th Camp	4½	50½	There was plenty of water at this camp in the bed of a torrent, which must be a stream at least 100 feet wide in the rainy season.
Mata (6th night)	4	54½	The road passes through a pleasant valley. The wells are surrounded by a group of fine trees, which give good shade, and swarm with pigeons.
Sahol	4	58½	Here is a large pool of water, left after the rains. There are no signs of inhabitants.
10th Camp (7th night)	6½	64½	No water at this camp. The road crosses a mountain range, steep and rocky in places, but passable for camels without any difficulty. There is but little vegetation; after passing the mountains the road descends into a comparatively fertile valley, in which is Roway, where there are wells with an abundant supply of good water.
Roway	8	72½	The road again is steep, then crosses a sandy desert for two hours, and another range of hills.
12th Camp (9th night)	9½	82½	No water.
Obak (10th night)	10	92½	The road crosses a wide desert before reaching these wells. The sand is light and unpleasant for marching. At Obak there are plenty of wells, but the water is brackish from passing through the salt sand. Here is joined the main road from Suakin to Berber.
14th Camp (11th night)	9	101½	No water.
Bir Mahobeh (12th night)	14½	115½	This part of the march is the most distressing. The sand is very deep in some places, and the camels march with difficulty.
Berber	2	117½	Here is a good supply of water, which is very refreshing after the hot desert march. The wells are much frequented by shepherds with their flocks and by passing caravans, which take in a supply of water before crossing the sands to Obak. For description of Berber, see page 229.

APPENDIX B

THE FIELDWORK PHASE: EGYPT & SUDAN JANUARY-AUG 2009

1. Objectives:

- a. To better understand the theatre of operations, including terrain, environmental conditions, operating constraints and interrelationship of key locations.
- b. To be better able to analyse British Campaign Management, together with the broader tactical conduct of operations and engagements; with the aim of arriving at a historically objective interpretations.
- c. To be better able to interpret and weight participant testimony and other source evidence.
- d. To create a photographic archive of the battlefields and other ground features of interest.
- e. To visit Egyptian and Sudanese museums, archives and heritage sites of relevance.

2. Obstacles. The fieldwork phase took place at a time of rising tension in the Sudan, culminating in the indictment of the head of state by the International Criminal Court. A pass system requiring government authority to proceed on road journeys outside Khartoum was in effect, while agents of the state security apparatus were present at all major communication hubs, including a series of permanent check points on the metalled road running north along the east bank of the Nile. This caused many practical difficulties which it is undesirable to reflect here, not least because it was sometimes necessary to resort to subterfuge in order that the goals of the fieldwork phase were achieved. It was necessary to treat all forays into the desert as a major expedition and to contingency plan against obstructionism. Ultimately, for all the difficulties, nothing which was physically possible was left unaccomplished. The 'nuisance' of the state security apparatus taken as read, most ordinary Sudanese could not have been more friendly or accommodating.

3. Exploring the Nile. One major undertaking was a river expedition from Sabalūka to Wad Habeshi, via Mernat Island. This entailed running the Sixth Cataract in a small boat, past many of the points which caused Wilson such difficulty. Using a combination of modern mapping and contemporaneous sketches, the precise point at which *Bordein* foundered was successfully located (see Illustrations 11 - 14). It was identified that a 30-metre channel has opened between what was once the northern tip of Mernat and the rest of the island. It also identified that Wilson's zariba position

is now only 100 yards from the new north tip, suggesting that if erosion continues at the same rate, the position will be lost over the coming century.

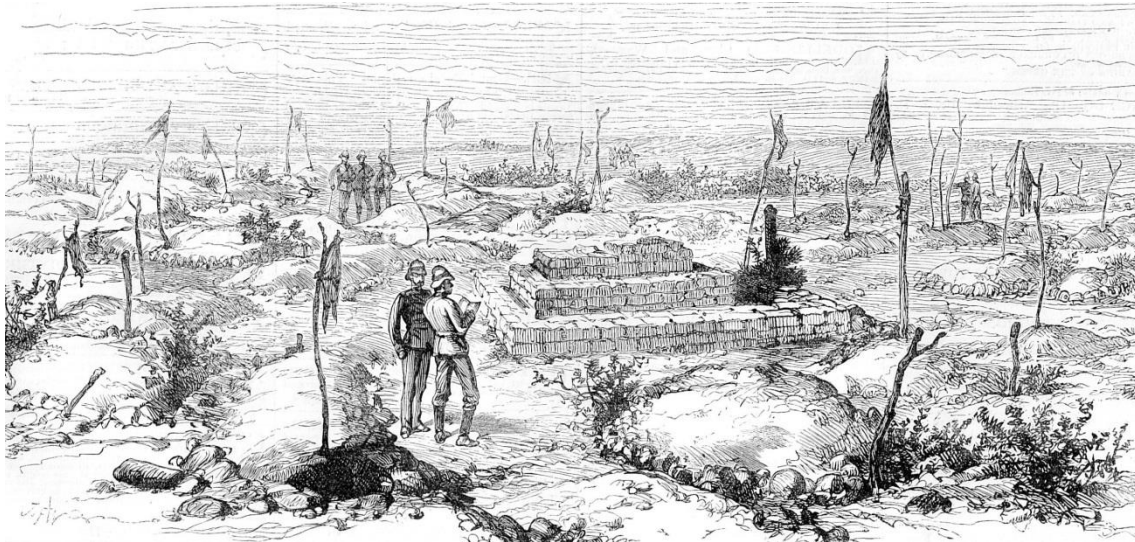


Illustration 16: Cartridge-case at Abu Klea.

Concentrations of cartridge cases are an ideal means of identifying a fighting position 124 years later. This case and many others were on the position occupied by the square at the climax of the battle. [Image Source: Fieldwork Phase 2009.]

4. List of Sites Visited:

- a. Battlefields: Tel-el-Kebir; 1st and 2nd El Teb; Tamai and Tamanieb; Abu Klea; Abu Kru; Metemmeh; Wad Habeshi; Hashin; Tofrek; Omdurman.
- b. Other sites of interest: Suakin Island and Town; The Cairo Citadel; Tokar; Shendy and Metemmeh; Mernat Island; Sabalūka Gorge; Sixth Cataract; Jebel Royan (where *Talahawiyeh* foundered).
- c. In and around Khartoum: confluence; Tuti Island; *sarāya* (Gordon's Palace); Mahdī's Tomb; Khalīfa's House; Anglican Cathedral (now a museum); CWGC Cemetery; steamer *Melik*; river forts; Omdurman and Kerreri Hills.



Illustrations 17 & 18: State of preservation on the battlefields

These two images demonstrate the utility of contemporaneous sketches in fixing the often remote and hard to locate battlefields of 128 years ago. The scene above is an eyewitness sketch drawn in the aftermath of 2nd El Teb (29 Feb. 1884). The warriors killed at 1st El Teb (4 Feb. 1884) had been buried in a flag-bedecked cemetery, which formed part of the Bija defensive position in the second battle. Below we can see how it looked in 2009. Note the 'wedding-cake' style monument in both images. [Image Sources: (above) ILN; (below) Fieldwork Phase, 2009.]



5. Condition of Sites. Khartoum is no longer the same of course, having expanded across the Niles in all compass directions. The confluence and Tuti Island remain substantially unaltered, however, while both the *sarāya* and the Mahdi's Tomb have been restored. No trace of the 'South Front' remains in what is now a heavily built-up area. The Khalīfa's house in Omdurman is intact and houses many interesting artefacts. The battlefields at Abu Klea and Abu Kru remain unspoiled. At the zariba position in the Abu Klea Valley, the rock walls and sangars raised by the British to protect their outposts are substantially intact. The battlefields of the Red Sea Littoral are similarly unspoiled. Suakin Island is particularly interesting as the island town was simply abandoned when the Condominium established Port Sudan 50 miles to the north. The buildings at Suakin were all constructed from coral and for the most part have fallen into ruins through neglect.

APPENDIX C

THE MARTINI-HENRY JAMMING CONTROVERSY

1. The fighting in the Bayūda was followed by a controversy over the number of rifles which had jammed at Abu Klea.¹ The issue was accentuated by the fact that a number of the P1860 sword-bayonets issued to the Camel Corps had bent during the melee.² Because Wolseley returned home furious about these failures and Burleigh mentioned them in the *Daily Telegraph*, a formal investigation ensued. Lord Charles Beresford was to assert in his memoirs of 1914 that, 'Nearly half the British rifles jammed, owing to the use of leaf cartridges.'³ This can be safely dismissed as hyperbole on the grounds, first, that had it been true the battle could not have been



Illustration 19: Martini-Henry Mk II and P1876 Bayonet

The P1876 bayonet shown above was carried by the infantry battalions with the expedition, but not by the Camel Corps, which carried the P1860 sword-bayonet. [Image Source: Aspinshaw Collection.]

won; and second, that nothing so extreme is reflected in other primary sources. Even so there was clearly an issue. Having briefly returned to England from the Sudan, prior to departing again for South Africa, I arranged to spend a range day in the company of Neil Aspinshaw, a leading expert on the Martini-Henry, with the aim of gaining a better understanding of the merits and foibles of the weapon. We fired not only drawn-brass rounds of modern manufacture, but also two dozen vintage rounds made of rolled-brass, so that smoke, smell and recoil were all faithfully replicated. The weapon's accuracy and ease of operation were striking.

2. Aspinshaw later traced Colonel H. T. Arbuthnot's inspection report of 17 September 1885 to the PRO at Kew and made a point of forwarding a copy. The scale of the investigation was interesting; some 538 weapons had been surrendered for

¹ Wilson, *Korti to Khartum*, 35.

² This was subsequently attributed to low grade metal and defective tempering in manufacture. Evidence also exists to show that the camel regiments had not been issued with whetstones prior to departing England, though we cannot be sure whether the deficiency was addressed on arrival in Egypt. If it was not then failing to 'sharpen for action' would not have helped.

³ Beresford, *Memoirs*, i, 267.

inspection when the troops returned to England. At the heart of the problem was not the rifle itself, but the rolled-brass Boxer cartridge, which was too easily dented in the men's pouches. This had been a recognized problem for a number of years, so that by 1885 drawn-brass cartridges were being rushed into service, though they were not available in the Bayūda. Interestingly, 248 of the rifles inspected proved to be Mark Is, which at some point prior to 26 September 1884, (the date on which the Camel Corps departed England),¹ had undergone an armourer's upgrade to the Mark II pattern. The balance consisted of newer rifles specifically manufactured as Mark IIs. While the Mark II had a much stronger extractor than its predecessor, it transpired that the upgrade had not included retro-fitting the new extractor. The result was that many old pattern extractors were slightly 'sprung', a phenomenon which Arbuthnot attributed to soldiers applying brute force to a jammed cartridge, with an extractor which was not strong enough to withstand many such occurrences. His problem was that he had no way of knowing which of the rifles inspected had jammed and which had not, but the obvious conclusion was that the old extractor should be eradicated. Arbuthnot drew to a close by stating that he was confident that the combination of drawn-brass cartridges and the new extractor would cure the problem. There is no compelling evidence to suggest that it did not and the Martini-Henry would shortly be phased out of service anyway in favour of the Lee-Metford. In contrast to Beresford's hyperbole of 1914, Alexander Macdonald had earlier articulated a much more measured view, drawing all the right tactical conclusions:

*That the fire of these companies as well as that of the whole force was weakened by the jamming of the cheaply made regulation cartridges with which they were supplied, and also by some imperfection in the cartridge extractors of their rifles, has been abundantly proved. But that these defects contributed, to the extent which has been alleged, to the giving way of a portion of the square, cannot be fairly maintained...*²

¹ Colvile, OH, i, 176-7.

² Macdonald, *Too Late*, 239.

APPENDIX D

SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES TO CHAPTER 3 (METHODOLOGY) PRACTICAL ASPECTS OF THE RESEARCH

1. **Photographic Archive.** There were no photographs of the Abu Klea, Abu Kru, Tamai, El Teb or Hasheen battlefields anywhere in the public domain before the execution of the field work phase. More than 2,000 photographs were captured and are presently being collated as an electronic archive. It is planned to deposit copies with the National Army Museum, the Sudan Archive at Durham University and the Cranfield University Library at Shrivenham.
2. **Utility of Contemporaneous Pictorial Evidence.** A proportion of the historic images gathered in preparation for fieldwork proved to have great utility on the ground. Space does not permit amplification, but illustrations 13, 15 and 17-18 convey the point well. I would recommend that anybody travelling to such remote battlefields should first scour the illustrated newspapers for sketches from 'special correspondents' and travel with copies to hand.
3. **Accessing Previously Unutilised Primary Source Material.**
 - a. Three new primary sources emerged from an online appeal on the Victorian Wars Forum (VWF), a resource I would recommend to anybody with an interest in the period. One of these was written by a sergeant in the Medical Staff Corps, while the other two, a lieutenant and a sergeant, had served in the Mounted Infantry Camel Regiment (MICR). Two of the items were significant participant accounts running to several pages, which contained much new information.
 - b. Because so many libraries and archives have striven over recent years to digitize their catalogues, periodic online key-word trawls were conducted. One such trawl identified a reference to Abu Klea in the electronic catalogue of the National Archives of Scotland. The trail pointed to the Airlie Papers, one of the ancient families of the Scottish nobility. The 11th Earl¹ had been Sir Herbert Stewart's brigade-major in the Sudan, suggesting that the lead would be worth following. In Edinburgh it transpired that the folio at issue contained nothing less than the 'lost' Orders Book and War Diary of Stewart's Desert Column, two hard-backed ledgers of the first importance.² An orders book constitutes the day by day record of all the formal orders issued by a commander to his force, while the War Diary is the daily record of occurrences. Archived in the same folio was a set of regimental returns listing fatal casualties up to and including

¹ Tallied excluding attainer.

² NAS 02024 GD16-52-57-10-A-00118 AB.

23 January 1885. Interestingly these returns divided the fatalities in the two Bayūda battles into men killed within the zarebas and those killed whilst fighting in square. This distinction is drawn nowhere else in the record and served to enable many deductions about the nature and character of the two fights which were not formerly possible. There were also a number of notes to Stewart, including correspondence from Wolseley and Wilson. Remarkably there was still sand in some of the folds. The importance of the folio having been highlighted to the NAS staff, it was then copied in its entirety so that both Orders Book and War Diary would be to hand during the fieldwork phase.

c. One of the difficulties presented by a three-year tour of duty in Arica (2009-2012) was that of accessing the barely utilised contemporaneous reporting of the war-correspondents. The problem was resolved by an online resource called the *British Newspaper Archive*. Of the newspapers represented in the Bayūda only the *Western Morning News* and the *Daily Telegraph* were not embraced by the archive, although not every edition of those which were was present and correct. Fortunately it was common practice for provincial papers to re-run verbatim articles from the London-based 'nationals'. This allowed almost all of the reporting of the 'special correspondents' on key dates to be traced, even if it was not necessarily in the pages of their own papers.

d. It was by following passing references in the newspapers that Charles Williams's attack on Wilson came to light. Next to surface was the Press Association interview which Wilson gave in response. Another trail led to the story of *The Saturday Review* libel case. Taken together these finds compelled the conclusion that the Wilson controversy was both more heated and more publicly debated than is reflected by the conventional historiography of the campaign. There were also items of press coverage in the online archives of the *New York Times* and the New Zealand National Archive.

4. Written Orders. Gaining access to the written orders and instructions governing the culminating phase of the campaign was crucial. Once the Orders Book of the Desert Column had been uncovered, the tactical level of command was comprehensively covered. It was necessary to know exactly what HMG had instructed Wolseley to do and what constraints it had imposed upon him. It would also be necessary to establish what the army commander in his turn had told his principal subordinates to do. It was not easy to uncover the top level direction, until it came to light that the *Standard* had published Hartington's direction in full on 28 October 1884. Wolseley's downwards direction was easier as most of it, with one important exception, had been incorporated into the Official History. The exception was a memorandum from Buller to Wilson which had accompanied his orders. As this document can be regarded as a metaphorical 'smoking gun', its absence confirms that the Official History reflects intentional sins of omission.

5. Mapping. C. E. Fowler's map, used by the British to navigate the Bayūda, was incorporated in the Volume III map-pack of Colvile's history, but credible and accurate *marked* maps would also be required as an enabler to fieldwork. Verner's diary revealed that he had surveyed the battlefields even while the enemy was still prowling them. Fortunately his mapping had been incorporated into Macdonald's *Too Late for Gordon and Khartoum*.¹ Accurate modern mapping would be required for desert navigation and fieldwork. Fortunately the geo-section of the UNMIS force headquarters had two sets of mapping in its database, a Soviet set from the 1970s, and the Sudan Political Service (SPS) set from the pre-independence period.

¹ See for example Maps 6 and 8.

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